

## **Inclusive Meaningful Volunteering goes beyond stuffing envelopes**

(I: Interviewer P: Participants)

- I: Greetings everybody, it's John McKenna here doing another So... podcast. My guests today are going to talk with me about volunteering and people disabilities and the whole world of the purpose of a volunteer at two levels. Who am I with? I'm with Camellia and Marnie. Camellia, tell us your story.
- P1: So, I'm part of the Victoria Alive project. I do a lot of the marketing, social media aspect of it, a lot of the design work to make sure a lot of our content is accessible and I also have developed the website and manage its content.
- I: That's great. And Marnie, welcome.
- P2: Thank you very much. I'm also part of the Victoria Alive project team. I do a lot of the communications, I'm the Communications and Stakeholder Coordinator. I do a lot of different things. The main two things I'm doing at the moment are our monthly newsletters and also a series of videos which will be coming out and launching as part of our social media campaign in September. I've got lived experience of disability through some severe mental health issues that took me out of the workforce and gave me some great opportunities in the volunteer workforce, including being a speaker for Beyond Blue.
- I: Fantastic. I love the name Victoria Alive.
- P2: So do we.
- I: It's a really alive, hello and I think in this whole world right now, especially looking through the disability lens it can be very complex and which way to go and going up and down, left and right. So let's get back to the basics about volunteering for whatever reason. It can be a pathway to employment or can be I just want to do something that has a purpose helping others. Is that fair to say that?
- P2: Absolutely. There's a lot of social and community benefits as well as personal benefits and also there's organisational and business benefits that a lot of organisations don't see from having a really robust and inclusive workforce of volunteers.
- I: For sure. So let's start thinking about some of the barriers from organisations' perspectives, there are so many factors about a person with a disability coming into an environment whether it be a workplace or being connected with a service. Let's talk about the unconscious bias and even the conscious bias. How do we break down these barriers?

P1: So one of the ways that, some of the barriers organisations face when trying to be inclusive for people with disabilities can be that there's this fear and anxiety about being inclusive and this misconception of how can I really engage with someone with a disability, so they sort of stay away from that and you think one of the solutions to actually fight that is or to overcome is to be more diverse with your workforce, be open to talking to people and seeing what their needs are. There's always benefit in being diverse as an organisation.

Some of the barriers that organisations have that we found through this project is not having an action plan in kind of directing them in how they need to again be more inclusive of everyone in the community. One of the other barriers is the capacity, not feeling adequate enough to engage everyone out there and the way you can overcome that barrier in particular is to engage disability support services, form partnerships with people in the community, with organisations, with disability support personnel or even special schools. So yeah, there's a lot to learn from these sort of partnerships.

P2: And there's a misconception as well John that people with disability are in need of volunteers to help them and not the people with disability are able and willing and wanting to be volunteers themselves. So some of the issues that they face themselves are where do we find the roles, and when we find the roles and go to the organisations how open are those organisations for people with disability to be volunteering.

As Camellia said there are a lot of issues around that but to be open and inclusive and inclusive and diversity – they're words that are bandied around a lot. I find that a lot of the time when people are talking about diversity, disability sometimes falls outside of that. People are thinking about diversity with religion, with sexual orientation, with all sorts of things and disability sometimes doesn't appear on that list. I think we really need to promote that as being something to be fully inclusive to make sure that those opportunities are there, and to educate organisations that it's not hard, that the roadblocks can be removed.

P1: And it's that slight shift in attitude, that shift in kind of understanding that the willingness to change, even making small changes in your physical environment to make your space more accessible, yeah we believe that there are small changes that you can make and there's also structural changes that you can address to be more inclusive of everyone.

I: These changes can be very small too.

P1: Absolutely and have an enormous impact.

I: That's right. I know at different times when I've been involved in different employment environments, I don't need a fully automatic door to open for me. It could just be the handle a bit lower down and then it's done. So they did move the handle down, one particular example, three other people said oh that's cool, it's easy for me too but I'm carrying my coffee. So it's amazing how these little tweaks makes life easier for people.

When we're talking about volunteering, I think there's another jargon word called 'codesign' and once again I think when we talk about people disability and their own lived experience, that adds so much to a culture or even the purpose of the job looking through different lenses no matter what the voluntary job is it's all about being creative when it comes to achieving something.

P1: Yeah.

I: So we're talking about things like bias and unconscious bias and that's probably the hardest nut to crack, to have that open conversation about what are the fears, what are we worried about. So Victoria Alive of course are aware of this and how is it being tackled?

P1: So there's this idea that you know there's this bias out there, there's this attitude that we've come from this institutionalisation of people with a disability and looking at them as a burden, and we're the sort of next generation that's trying to shift that attitude and you know really kind of understand that everybody in the community has something to offer, to be open, to be kind of accepting of everybody. People with disability do face, there is that bias out there and if they're also part of another community like the LGBT community it gets even harder for them, yeah.

P2: And I think as well some of the adjustments that might need to be made when people with disability are volunteering, that bias can be shifted by something as easily as a willingness to have a conversation, a willingness to be adaptable and flexible. You don't need to rebuild your building. What you do need to be able to do is just ask questions – what is it that you need? What is it that we can do to help? And allow that person to reply and just opening those doors of conversation can make all the difference.

I: Going back a step for a minute, we talked about people disabilities and even having conversations with their family about okay, I'm going to do some volunteering. So first question that comes to mind is, is this going to be a pathway to employment or no, I just want to volunteer and share my knowledge and experiences with the world? So I think that's interesting, no doubt when we talk about a career pathway volunteering is a great way to test the water, isn't it?

P1: Yeah for sure. We completely understand what's you know volunteering is one of the benefits of volunteering is that it's a pathway to employment but volunteering in and of itself has its own sort of benefits and we do you know, we do support employers to be, we encourage employers to be more inclusive but you know, volunteering is something that you know, it benefits people who engage in it and I think yeah, everyone should be allowed to access that.

P2: And the scope of the project is specifically looking at volunteering and ensuring that we increase those rates of people with disability being able to volunteer and having the ability through different organisations to volunteer. As Camellia said, the benefits are of volunteering in and of itself are great. It also provides you with

an opportunity to gain self-confidence and experience if that then leads to an employment pathway. It's almost icing on the cake and unfortunately it sits just outside of Victoria Alive but it's something that if we can start changing those attitudes, changing those beliefs of organisations, then hopefully we'll see that pathway open up more.

I: And I think, if I'm talking through my own personal disability lens, to say that I get out of bed and I do work. Now work is still volunteering, so forget about that money bit, okay to say yes I work for Red Cross. Yes I work for another organisation. It's still work, I'm still doing something.

P1: Absolutely.

I: People don't really, you know, sure if they find you volunteering that's even better still but I think people with disabilities like to have their own pitch when they meet someone on the train or meet someone at a party about what do you do. And I think I'm finding more and more people use the word 'work' instead of volunteering but when there's greater rapport with that person they say and by the way also do it as a volunteer, you are damn good.

P2: It carries more weight I think sometimes, when you talk to people about what it is you do and then you say that you're doing it in a volunteer capacity you know, I think a lot of people are really impressed by people who will dedicate that time. And it's really about making sure that people with disability who want to volunteer have the opportunity to find those roles and to have organisations being open and adaptable to that.

I: Also challenge everybody I guess when we talk about volunteering, people with disabilities volunteering, let's make it meaningful.

P1: It has to be meaningful.

I: I think it is about exploring the match of the task with the person with a disability. We are not just here to do the photocopying. I think mentoring is a form of volunteering and I believe that's perhaps an area that could be digged into, would you agree with that?

P2: I actually would agree with that, and I think that misconception of volunteering isn't solely looking at people with disability volunteering, that's a bit of a misconception about volunteering as a whole. That you come in to do the roles that the paid employees don't want to do.

Fortunately a lot of organisations don't see volunteering that way because they've started to have those conversations of what is it that you want to do, what is it that you're able to do? What we need to do is make sure those conversations are coming over so all of the people who are coming to discuss volunteer roles have those same conversations. Because you're right, it's not just about envelope stuffing and photocopying. People have an enormous amount of skills whether they're able bodied or not.

- I: For sure. When we talk about projects such as Victoria Alive, they don't just happen. Obviously there's a bit of research about why we're doing it. Obviously there's a bit of funding. But more importantly who are you using to keep on track? What resources are you using? You don't just sit at your desk and say I'm feeling good doing this, I assume there's been external input into how you're travelling?
- P2: We've got a really robust structure around the project. The project is state government funded with a lot of support from DHHS, which has been brilliant. We also have a really wonderful project advisory group that's a group of people who have volunteer experience and also lived experience of disability. They've been absolutely pivotal throughout the project, meeting quite regularly and donating their time to the project to help advise us on directions that we're going, things that we're thinking of putting together we're able to pick their brains, get some of their input and they've helped guide some of that direction.
- P1: Yep, and I think it's really important to have people with lived experience when you're doing a project like this. There are a lot of sensitivities that we ourselves might not know as people with not lived experience. So I think that was a really important and integral part and aspect of this project, to kind of go back to the project advisory group and get direction on everything that we did.
- I: It just made me reflect about we've all got, I sit here in a wheelchair and the amount of times that I've been invited into a hotel because a man has spent \$25,000 on having a fully accessible bathroom but no-one has used it – please John, could you come in and use the toilet, and I'll give you a beer, right so that's where people with disabilities are called upon to do some test dummy type work. But it's not just that, we talked about the stigma and the purpose of what we're here for. I've also got views on how to do some gardening and how to change a policy for people who are deaf, so I think this is where we talk about diversity.
- P1: Yeah, and this project is about inclusive volunteering but it's also about effective volunteering and how can people with disability be involved in volunteering in an effective manner.
- P2: And in a meaningful manner.
- I: That's the word.
- P2: The idea is that, and we knew this from the beginning and the advisory group has also helped us to avoid, we're all smart enough to know this but good to have it outlined for us, to avoid that celebration of oh you got milk today, well done you're a real hero. You know, because people with disability, they're living their lives the same way as everybody else is. They may live it in a slightly different way and that doesn't make it anything other than different.

I: That's right, and I think I always bring up my good friend and colleague who is no longer with us anymore, Stella Young. We all know Stella Young you know, I'm not an inspiration cos I got out of bed, I do it every day.

P1: Absolutely.

I: My final question is about the magic wand. If I was to give each of you a magic wand, how would you use it and how would it make things better for the whole volunteering sector being inclusive for people with disabilities?

P1: Yeah look simply put, that simply looks like a future where volunteers, people with a disability who want to volunteer don't have to think twice when they're looking for roles. That the barriers don't exist anymore, that organisations feel that they're well supported and resourced to support everyone in their community, yeah.

I: And what about you Marnie?

P2: Well apart from the planets aligning and it being sunny and 27 degrees every day, I totally agree with Camelia and from an organisational perspective my utopia shows that organisations understand that every person walking through the door has skills, has something to give, and also something to gain from volunteering. And that any roadblocks and any barriers, no matter what challenges that volunteer might have in their lives, that everyone is able to walk through the door and then walk out feeling positive about a volunteering experience.

I: So cool. If people want more information about Victoria Alive, have you got a website in your head?

P1: Yep, [victoriaalive.org.au](http://victoriaalive.org.au). We have a lot of resources there, a lot of videos from our forums, guides that we're going to be putting up, content on social media, you know it's a centralised support for people with a disability wanting to volunteer and organisations as well. So yeah, check it out.

P2: And you can also sign up for the newsletter.

P1: You can also sign up for the newsletter.

I: I've enjoyed the chat. Thank you both.

P1: Thank you.

P2: Thank you so much John, it's been wonderful.

[End of recording]