Episode 4: A Conversation with Marc Workman (Mentorship, Networking & Flexible Career Paths)

## Marc: [00:00:01]

I would say I'm fairly comfortable with change, and that may have to do with the fact that I experienced a lot of change when it came to my vision growing up.

[music]

## Andrea: [00:00:13]

Welcome to Broadcastability, a podcast by for and about workers with disabilities and inclusive workplaces. It's part of the Proud Project at the University of Toronto. You can find out more about the Proud Project on our website: [theproudproject.ca.](https://www.theproudproject.ca/)

[music]

## Chloe: [00:00:40]

This podcast was recorded and produced on the traditional ancestral territories of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River. We would also like to acknowledge the other Indigenous lands across Turtle Island, where we conduct our research and record this podcast mic, which.

[music]

## Chloe: [00:01:06]

Hi, I'm Chloe Atkins, and I'm a political scientist at the University of Toronto, and I'm the lead investigator of the PROUD Project. I'm a bit of an oddball because I do work in medicine and disability, and Andrea Whiteley and I have worked together for a number of years.

## Andrea: [00:01:19]

Hi, I'm Andrea Whiteley, and I am the postdoctoral research fellow for the Proud Project. I have a PhD in Communications and I had the idea to create these podcasts as an innovative and compelling way to communicate our research to the public by allowing our research participants to tell their stories.

[music]

## Chloe: [00:01:45]

This week we're talking to Marc and actually, Andrea, you have a really interesting story about how we actually even began to speak, to work, how we found them.

## Andrea: [00:01:53]

Yes, a girlfriend of mine noticed him or saw him in Avenue magazine, which is a local magazine about what's going on in Edmonton, and there was a “Top 40 under 40” piece and he was in that. So he was featured in this article about successful people in Edmonton. And aside from that, might my friend also saw him walking along the street every day. They live in kind of the same neighborhood, so it was kind of cute that she made that connection. That led me to contacting him. I tracked him down as he was working for the Alberta government, and I found him. It is really hard to recruit people for research, so we look everywhere, we scour. We ask all of our friends and family to help us when we're recruiting for research, and that's how we found him.

## Chloe: [00:02:36]

I really looked forward to talking to him, and this interview just totally fulfilled all my anticipation. The two things that strike me in this interview is one just how capable and smart and articulate he is, but also that his guide dog Bella is sort of intermittently snoring throughout the recording, which is, it's actually kind of sweet.

## Andrea: [00:02:54]

And he says he's comfortable with change, and I thought that was really important as well for anybody who is trying to make their way in the world and develop their career.

## Chloe: [00:03:03]

One of the things we found in our research is this is a trait that people with disabilities in the workforce show just a flexibility and adaptability. They know how to deal with change and they know how to deal with it successfully. And he's just a prime example of that. Absolutely.

[music]

## Marc: [00:03:26]

My name is Marc Workman. I am from Edmonton, where I currently reside. I work for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, that's the CNIB. And I'm a program and operations manager with CNIB for the Alberta-Northwest Territories division. I've been in this role not very long, since May, so around six months now. Prior to that, I spent five and a half years working for the Alberta public service in a variety of roles, mostly in the area of policy development and policy research and that sort of thing. Prior to that, I actually worked for CNIB previously. And before that, I did university. My background is in political science. I have a master's in political science and was pursuing a PhD in philosophy when I ended up deciding to switch career paths and took a position with the CNIB.

## Marc: [00:04:27]

I have a condition called retinitis pigmentosa, which is a genetic condition that causes degenerative eyesight over time, so you lose your vision as you age, and it affects everyone very differently. Some people are driving into their 20s or even 30s with this condition. In my case, I was diagnosed at around age five and probably was legally blind around age 10 or so. So it mine was a particularly aggressive form of the condition. And as a result, I at this point have lost pretty much all of my vision. I have some light perception in one eye, but nothing that really does much benefit to me.

## Chloe: [00:05:13]

How did you come to that? One of the things I'm interested in our study has been interested in is that transition. How do you get into the workplace? How do you move? I mean, you said that you moved to grade nine. If you could just tell me a little bit as you move into high school, because that's really the beginning of sort of career planning where you went and how you how you navigated that as a blind young person getting into the workplace and learning these essential lessons.

## Marc: [00:05:37]

It wasn't the easiest path. My vision was degenerative, and so it got worse as I went through school and I was someone looking back who really resisted identifying as blind and didn't want to accept any assistance when it came to things like large print textbooks or other pieces of technology. Even a white cane, which I did not use until way beyond when it was helpful to do so. So I resisted a lot of these supports and tools because I was embarrassed. I didn't want to be seen as blind and needing these tools. So because of that, I steadily lost grades. Grades went down over the course of junior high and high school, and eventually I actually dropped out of high school. I had basically I was at a point where I was putting so little into school that it just made no sense to continue going. And so my life could have gone in a fairly different direction as a result, and I ended up actually going to the CNIB as a 17 year old. And I wanted to talk to someone about how I could get a job. What work could I do? I was 17. I didn't really know other blind people. And so I didn't know any more than the average sighted person would about what jobs a blind person could do.

## Marc: [00:07:07]

And so I went there and I met with a gentleman who was himself totally blind. And it was really an interesting experience for me because again, I hadn't really spent a lot of time with blind adults. And so this gentleman was a professional and dressed in a suit and went and got us some coffee for our meeting and things that on the surface are somewhat small. But I hadn't really encountered anyone who was totally blind doing that type of thing, and it did help me, I think, to meet someone in that position. And his advice was, “There's a lot of jobs you can do as someone who's blind, Marc, but I think your best bet is to go and get an education; it's going to open up a lot more opportunities for you if you're able to do that.” And I don't think he realized that I would spend the next 10 years in university getting a variety of degrees. But that's where my life ended up ended up going, and I'm very grateful I did get an education. I don't think I would be where I am if I hadn't pursued that path.

## Chloe: [00:08:11]

All of these questions have actually brought me around to a number of things. First of all, you're not the first person I've read about or talked to who's blind who resisted being blind. I think there's, oh, is it Steve Kuusisto? Anyway, who wrote a book *Planet of the Blind*, and he talks about his childhood in which he, like, rode a bike and didn't really sort of stupid things while his vision kept deteriorating and his family was kind of in denial. But I also think that you're then performing much in the same way that that man at CNIB performed for you. You are become sort of, in some ways, an icon but a mentor and you develop community with my disability. When I found I actually resisted the term to some day when I spent 15 years in a wheelchair and didn't didn't see myself as disabled, which I kind of laugh about now. But I did find such resource with people who were sort of similar to me. I learned so much about how to navigate the world from them. And I just wonder whether you have this same feeling and how did your family help you do that or not help you? Or how did you emerge into to into the state you are now? Other than that mentor? But were there other things that also contributed?

## Marc: [00:09:17]

There were university was, as it is for many individuals, was very formative. And so in my case, I remember taking a philosophy class called equality and social justice, where we were looking at issues of gender, of sexual orientation, race and trying to sort of unpack how those concepts get applied and what they mean and how they affect people in different ways. And what I found kind of interesting was I could relate to a lot of the topics, but there was no actual discussion of disability in in that course. And so I did go to my Prof. At the end and say, you know, I feel like there's a lot of overlap with some of the issues that people with disabilities experience. And I think now that's not a surprising kind of realization. This would have been close to 20 years ago, and so there may not have been quite the same lining up of disability with racism and sexism and homophobia and those types of issues. And so he gave me a few resources which helped me as I ended up doing a lot of my undergrad and graduate degrees focused on disability and disability scholarship. But the other thing that came out of that course was I decided, Well, I'm going to just Google “Philosophy Blind” and see what comes up, and at the time, Google was kind of unusual, it was relatively new, and so I wasn't sure what was what was going to come up. And what ended up coming up was the National Federation of the Blind, which is an organization in the United States, and they talk about their philosophy of blindness, which is why I think Google pointed me in that direction and I didn't know anything about the organization.

## Marc: [00:11:00]

I started reading some speeches and other documents like that and was just blown away of how they were describing blindness and the way they talked about blindness being a physical characteristic. And the real problem associated with blindness is not the lack of eyesight, it's the social barriers that prevent people from living the lives that they want to live. And now, I mean, I spent 20 years believing that, but at the time it was a relatively new idea for me and it made a huge difference. I actually went to one of their conventions in the United States and met some a lot of blind people, successful blind people, some blind scholars were there. And by doing that, I think it completely changed how I looked at blindness. I was ashamed, I think is fair. I had conversations about whether or not I would have kids and was resistant because of the fear of passing on my blindness and after encountering this new way of thinking about it and encountering a community of people who weren't ashamed, who recognized that the fact that they couldn't see is just a different way of perceiving the world. And they still have every right to be in the world and participating in the world, as everyone else does. Once I encountered that, it really did have a huge impact on how I saw myself and how I understood my blindness. So that was definitely a changing, a sort of turning point in my life was that early university experience.

## Andrea: [00:12:37]

And in our last conversation, you described how in your career you also adapted quite a bit. You started out working in an entry position and then you moved laterally in the organization. You also were moving up as well to a management position. So how did you end up in that management role, do you think?

## Marc: [00:12:58]

I would say I'm fairly comfortable with change, and that may have to do with the fact that I experienced a lot of change when it came to my vision growing up. And so when I'm moving from position to position, I'm fairly good at just rolling with things, forming new relationships with people, learning, learning how the culture might be a little different or the processes might be a little different and just sort of being very open to that change. So that's probably benefited me in terms of moving around from position to position. One of the nice things about working for a large organization like the Alberta Public Service is there are a lot of opportunities for moving around, and some of those opportunities are only available if you are already employed by the organization. So once you get your foot in the door, you really do have a lot more opportunities to take on new challenges, new roles. And I was one who was constantly seeking out those new opportunities, looking for ways to increase my responsibility and my areas of expertise. And as a result, I applied on a variety of positions and interviewed in different departments, which also allowed me to grow my network a little bit. When you have the chance to interview and meet different people. You form some connections that can be helpful.

## Chloe: [00:14:21]

Now you also you talked in a previous interview, but I was really impressed by how you consciously joined committees, and I don't think they were paid necessarily those committees within your work organizations and tell me about that because I think it relates to what you're saying.

## Marc: [00:14:35]

I think by getting involved in assignments that you don't necessarily have to things like employee engagement, diversity and inclusion, those types of we have an employee resource group for people with disabilities at the government. When you get involved in those types of initiatives that you're not required to, but you want to. It shows a commitment to the organization. And so I think that helps with people seeing that you are dedicated to not just doing your job, but actually making the workplace a better place to to work. But it also helps you grow that network as well. And I feel that having a network is super helpful when it comes to trying to find new opportunities to get jobs. I relied on my network by calling people who I who I knew if I was looking to join a team and I knew someone on that team. They can offer advice to you. They may be able to vouch for you with the person who's making the hiring. And so it's a definitely an asset, if you can do that. And the other benefit that I found with joining some of these committees is you can end up having opportunities that you wouldn't otherwise. So one example that I like to give is I was fairly junior in my role, but I was the chair of the Employee Engagement Committee for one of the departments. And as a result, I was presenting to the deputy minister and the executive team so that the leadership of the department because of the role I had, I was able to get in front of them and demonstrate my abilities and my ability to communicate and present well in a way that I just wouldn't have had that opportunity in my my day-to-day job because of sort of where I was at.

## Chloe: [00:16:23]

So I'm just interested in how you navigated those work relationships at various levels, because I remember you mentioned that you learn to kind of trade tasks with your peers or with your coworkers based on your strengths and their strengths, and that seemed to work for you.

## Marc: [00:16:43]

That's right, I found that was another advantage of a sort of large organization is that there are usually many people on the team, and you can figure out what is the most efficient way to accomplish the goal and, in some cases, that might be one person doing it all. And a lot of cases, though, it's sharing the task among several people and trying to use your strengths to do your part and passing certain tasks on to others where they have strengths. So one example might be around developing a PowerPoint presentation. It's something that you can do if you're blind for sure, but it is inherently quite a visual medium. And so unless you're someone who has taken a lot of time to really understand PowerPoint from a blindness perspective, its chances are someone with sight who will be able to do the same task quite a bit faster in terms of making a visually appealing presentation. So when I was working with colleagues, I might develop the content and then someone else on the team might put the content into the actual presentation. And so that was a way where we could share, share the workload and play to our play, to our strengths because some people are just naturally really good at making those types of visual presentations. And that was not an area of expertise for me.

## Chloe: [00:18:08]

So that's fascinating. What I'm curious about is how you negotiate that with your peers because, you know, there are actually when the ADA came in in the [United] States, there was a lot of resistance actually by coworkers. So I'm intrigued how you navigate that in the workplace and how you deal with that.

## Marc: [00:18:25]

It's a good question, and I think what helps is trying to establish relationships. And so I would, you know, make a point of getting to know new colleagues and trying to build those relationships. But I think the other thing that helps is I was always ready to help in any way that I could, so I would often offer to assist in different tasks. And I think by doing that, by sort of showing that I am someone who is not trying to get out of work and I'm happy to do what I can. And if that means helping you out in various ways, that's something I want to do because we are on a team together. And so by demonstrating that from myself, I think that made people a little bit more comfortable with taking on tasks. If I might suggest that it would be a little more efficient if you did X. And I did, why

## Andrea: [00:19:17]

What we find in our research, as well as that diversity and inclusion initiatives are really affecting change in our world. But there's still a lot to be learned around disability and inclusion, and that disability is one aspect where there's been a lot of discrimination and still is in the workplace. And so given all the different places you've worked and the experience you had, the philosophical background you have like, how do you think we can establish or create a culture within workplaces that are more inclusive for people who are blind or people with disabilities in general? Do you have some thoughts on that?

## Marc: [00:20:03]

I do think it's a challenge, and you are seeing a lot of talk about it. And the question is what type of action will follow? I would say that getting the policies in place is sort of step number one. So do we do we have a commitment to the diversity and inclusion and that we're willing to put our name behind that? We are stating publicly and for all of our employees that this is our view. That's step one. But the problem is some organizations might stop at their step one. We've made our commitment. We believe in diversity inclusion, and that's where that's where it ends. And that's obviously not going to have a significant change on the culture. We need the actions to go with it. And so for me, one of my suggestions for employers would be to be proactive about the inclusion piece. And what I mean by that is not just waiting for people to tell you that they're experiencing a barrier, but to actually have a process in place where you go out and look for the barriers. You will ask employees, what barriers are you facing and how can we remove them? So it's less about reacting to barriers that are brought to your attention and more about proactively seeking them out so that they can be removed. And I think for me, that sends such an important signal to the employees that you don't have to be afraid to ask for this accommodation. You don't have to worry that we're going to think less of you or think you're not as good an employee. In fact, we invite you, we want you to tell us what technology you would find more helpful. If there are ways we could rearrange the work that would make you more productive by asking those questions. I think it sends a strong signal, and you're much more likely to have employees identifying what sorts of supports they need when they when you've been asked those types of questions.

## Chloe: [00:22:08]

I agree with you wholeheartedly that it has to be proactive. But so there has to be an environment in which they think about low vision, low hearing, you know, mobility impairments all the time, like it's just part of the world and that actually we all suffer from these various things. Even if you consider yourself a body, these things, you know, ebb and wane. But so one of the things I'd like to ask is, can you tell us about some of the things that you use in the world, both at home and at work as your accommodations and your way to get by? And you might tell us a little bit about Bella and some of the other technologies. Bill is not a technology, but that you use.

## Marc: [00:22:44]

Yeah, I use something called a screen reader. So this is a piece of software that you install on the computer and it will read aloud the text that's on the screen. And that way I can access it. And with this piece of software, you can do the typical things you would do know deal with Microsoft Office products, browse the web, do research, read documents. Those types of things are all made possible with a screen reader. There is a caveat, and that is if things are not coded in ways that the screen reader can access. If instead of a properly tagged PDF, for example, you end up having a scanned PDF, then the screen reader does have its limits. It can't decode a picture, for example. And so when you have a picture of text that there are ways workarounds hacks that you can do to get access to it, but it takes quite a bit longer to access that document. And that's something I would use quite regularly because we just… it is pretty common in a lot of workplaces that you scan pieces of mail or you scan documents and then send them that way. What I always find funny is when sometimes you have an accessible electronic version, you print it out and you scan it, and now you've taken what was accessible and made it inaccessible. And so those situations are ones where you can rely on OCR - Optical Character Recognition. But as I mentioned, it does take quite a bit longer to do that.

## Chloe: [00:24:26]

That's a situation where, as you describe, that if you're proactive as an organization, you've already then set up that people know these documents are accessible and know what to do with them. But if you don't have a policy, then you run into having to use OCR, which takes time.

## Marc: [00:24:40]

I think no one is deliberately making documents less accessible. They are just creating the documents that they themselves typically use and just haven't thought about the fact that someone with a screen reader who uses a screen reader may not be able to access it. And I've had quite a few situations where I might reach out to folks and just let them know that. When you put… examples like we're going to do our holiday party and we want to make it, we want to make it look nice, so we'll take a picture and then we'll add the text to the picture and it's this, you know, I'm sure it's quite a nice looking picture with all of the text about the holiday party kind of embedded into the picture. And I would have to reach out to folks and just say, like, is it, you know, is there any way you can add the text separately? You could attach it separately or you could send it to me, like there are pretty easy things to do that would eliminate that as a problem. And always the response was, “Oh, I had no idea. I just didn't. I didn't think about that.” You know, here is all of the relevant details, that sort of thing. And so in my experience, people are not doing it deliberately. Like you say, it's a matter of not knowing, and that's largely because we don't have an accessible communications policy at our workplace. For example,

## Andrea: [00:25:58]

With working online, so many people now are using Zoom calls or some sort of form of video conferencing. How does that work for you when you're in a in a meeting where you're using different senses than everybody else because they've got that visual?

## Marc: [00:26:12]

Like many things, it's sort of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, being able to access conversations, meetings, webinars, things like that from the comfort of your home. It removes a huge barrier, which is transportation that a lot of people with disabilities experience. And so if you're someone who is blind, then maybe getting across town to a place you've never been to watch a lecture might be just too much. It might just not be worth it. But if you can sit down on your couch and log in and have access to it, then you've just eliminated a major barrier. So on the one hand, I'm excited about it and interested to see how this new found understanding of working from home, like how that translates into more opportunities for people with disabilities, particularly the people who are blind. On the other hand, of course, it is quite a visual way of communicating. And so I would if I'm going to be in a meeting, chairing a meeting, for example, I would much rather do it in person. I have a better sense of where people are in the room. I can get a sense of whether people want to intervene just because of maybe taking in a breath or a shuffling around. You can just get cues, audio cues that are very helpful and that you lose often with Zoom, so people will often communicate using thumbs up or other visual things and. And I think that's largely because the audio piece of meetings that are virtual is often not great. You can't really hear when two people talk at the same time because one of them will come much louder than the other one if that happens in person.

## Marc: [00:27:58]

You can generally hear that two people have tried to get in, and you may even have a sense of what each of them said. But when you lose that type of thing with meetings, you also find, too that people will make use of chat. And I think that's partly a way of getting around the issues with audio. So chat is commonly used in these meetings, and that can be tricky for someone in my situation because reading the chat is done through listening to it by me, my screen reader will read it out, so it's accessible in that sense. But if I'm spending my time reading the chat, I'm having a hard time focusing on who else who is actually speaking. And I think this happens with sighted people, too if you get a very busy chat. It can take away from your ability to kind of focus on the actual discussion. But I think it's sort of doubly an issue if you're blind because you're not only listening to the chat, you're trying to listen to the to the speaker. So there are features of the virtual meetings that I am not a fan of, and I do like those in-person meetings because of the additional kind of cues and input you get that that seems to be missing. But as I said, like, I am also excited about the opportunities that it can open up by eliminating transportation as a as a barrier,

## Chloe: [00:29:13]

As an extension of what you talk about having an accessible communication policy, which you know, finally, people are getting that. I think out here in Ontario, there's the ADA has sort of pushed for that. I think that we should also maybe have an accessible technology policy. And I'm wondering how you do it work with making sure your screen readers interact with whatever upgrades or IT systems are being used at work and how you navigate that as well?

## Marc: [00:29:40]

Yeah, I agree with you on the need for some sort of accessible tech policy. So in the government of Alberta, one of our recommendations as the Disability Employee Resource Group, one of the things we were pushing for is to have an accessible and accessibility checklist built into procurement. And so I believe last time we talked a bit about. Some new technology that was brought into the government and this was in meeting rooms and it was introducing video conferencing technology. One of the challenges that came up was that the pad, the device that was used to access the video conferencing system was not accessible. And that might have been one thing in and of itself. But what ended up happening was sometimes the teleconference lines were removed and the thinking was, Well, we'll just use this new technology. We don't need the old phone system. And so now not only can I not access the video conference, but I can. I couldn't even set up teleconference calls anymore, and that was sort of like a part of the job that I had to do. And people would be understanding if I needed to ask for assistance and that sort of thing. But it's one of those situations where, yeah, if we have to get your help, then you're willing to. And that's great.

## Marc: [00:31:00]

But in an ideal world, we would have done a bit of a review for accessibility before purchasing the technology. And maybe there is nothing out there that could have met the needs that was accessible. I don't know that for a fact, but I'm confident that the question wasn't asked because we don't have a sort of process in place that says any new procurement. We are going to look at these five questions. We're going to ask ourselves these five questions before we move forward. And so I don't know yet exactly where the government's at with that, but that's certainly something that disability advocacy groups are often often pushing for. Because if you're going to spend a lot of money on this stuff anyway, let's try to make it accessible. And the great thing is, with your purchasing power, you will not only like you will create an incentive for organizations, for businesses to make their products more accessible. When you're asking them, like, does this product? Will it work for someone who can't see someone who can't hear it's in their interest to respond to that demand of the market to be more accessible? And that's where you get companies who will make their products accessible so that they can access these large contracts with governments or universities or that sort of thing.

## Chloe: [00:32:18]

Often, I think we presume that employment employing people with disabilities, it's all up to the employer to somehow do that. And I've learned from our we've learned from our research that there are a lot of community and things that are external as well, like transportation, housing, all these other factors and financial security that I think make a difference in getting an education. Education is key getting people into the workplace. But I want you to talk a little bit about Bella, really, because I think for most people, they see a dog and it's he or she's so cute, and I'm not sure they realize what the application process is, how long it takes, what it's like to train with a service dog and then what it's like to work and live with the service dog and how that works.

## Marc: [00:33:02]

Yeah. So Bella is my second guide dog and I got her from a school in the United States. So Guide Dogs for the Blind. We do have schools in Canada and a lot of people will go to those schools. In my case, I knew people who had gone to the U.S. who had gone to this school in particular, and I was impressed with the training of the of the dog. And it was also a chance to go to San Francisco for a couple of weeks and they take Canadian students, so there's no cost to the student of going down and picking up the dog. And then they also are much larger schools than the ones we have in Canada. So that tends to mean you don't have to wait as long. There are exceptions, of course, but when you've got a large school that's getting a bunch of dogs out into the field every year, they're more likely to have a match for you than a school that only has a handful of dogs. They will try to match dogs with the lifestyle that someone lives. And so in my case, recognizing that I have an office job and that I will be in meetings for a couple of hours at a time, sometimes they would try to find a dog that can settle really quickly, and that is is pretty relaxed.

## Marc: [00:34:17]

And will they know this dog can sit under a table for two hours and won't and won't get too upset by that sort of thing? Even the fact that I live in a more urban environment, some dogs are going to be more comfortable with trucks and cars whizzing past than other dogs, and they, the trainers are pretty good at picking that up. And so they'll match me with a dog that is more comfortable in these busy downtown streets, so they do try to take those types of things into account. And when it comes to the wait list, it really depends on the school. In my case, my first dog, I was only on the wait list for about five months. So I applied in May and went down in September. When it came to Bella, it was about a year between when I no longer had my first dog and then the time that I went down to the U.S. to pick up Bella.

## Chloe: [00:35:10]

I'd really love to hear about training, what's involved and working and living with the dog.

## Marc: [00:35:16]

Yeah, the way the training works is you would go down to the school. I should say there are two types of training one where you go and live at the school. And then they also some schools will offer an option where out of your home, they will train you in sort of in your neighborhood, in your home, that sort of thing. But I think the more common process is to go to a school wherever that happens to be located, whether it's Canada or somewhere in the U.S. and you spend differs from school to school. But you'll spend anywhere from two to four weeks working with the dog and a trainer to learn exactly how to work with the dog, what the commands are, what the dog can help you with, and where the dog, where you're going to have to step in and figure things out on your own. People are like these dogs are truly amazing and what they can do. But it sometimes is a little amusing in what people think they can do. Like they don't read street signs. They don't, they don't obey or follow traffic signals and those types of things like you still as the person as the handler need to be paying close attention to what what's happening around you.

## Marc: [00:36:28]

You need to be able to give signals to the dog in terms of when it's when it's safe to cross the street, which direction you want to go. Those types of things. And so like, it's definitely a team effort, and that's why you go down and you spend two to four weeks with a trainer with the dog learning exactly how the dog operates, how fast they walk, those types of types of things. And then you'll bring the dog home and start getting accustomed to your own environment. And most schools are very good about doing follow ups, so they'll call you shortly after you get home. Make sure things are going well, they'll do a check in after a couple of months, they'll come out and usually do a visit within the first year of you being home just to make sure that. That you will feel supported after you leave the school, because it is a very different environment, when you've got a trainer who's an expert who's with you all the time and giving you tips and advice to then when you're at home and you're on your own trying to figure things out. So schools are usually quite good at providing follow up support.

## Andrea: [00:37:38]

I think people are generally quite fascinated with dogs that do jobs right, and this is really interesting if you're not someone who has experience with that. And I remember you telling us how when you took Bella into the workplace, she would always kind of cause a stir and people really, you know, would greet her or greet you, hopefully do. But we were alluding previously to how you set up your life for success. Tell us about your accommodation and how you chose to live downtown, so tell us about that.

## Marc: [00:38:11]

I'm in a neighborhood called Oliver, which is just west of downtown Edmonton. And if you can make it work, in my opinion, neighborhoods that are sort of in the core near downtown in my experience are often the more accessible ones. So you usually have a larger number of people living together, and as a result, you can have more amenities, more businesses and that sort of thing in a in a smaller space. So for me, it's great any anything I would need to access. I can do in a short walk, you know, typically within 15-20 minutes, you can get to dozens of restaurants and coffee shops and grocery stores and even things like a tailor and a dry cleaner and those types of things. They're all within a couple of blocks because of how densely populated the neighborhood is. Now, I totally recognize that not everyone, if you've got a family of three kids, it may not be a neighborhood that you feel is totally appropriate. And I work on the Community League board out here as well, and we want to see more families moving into these types of communities. But we recognize that right now, the housing is often not great.

## Marc: [00:39:25]

It's either not set up for a family or there may be a three-bedroom condo, but it's $700,000, which in Toronto may be cheap, but in Edmonton would be quite expensive. And so I know that not everyone can live in these types of neighborhoods. But if you can, as a person with a disability, I think they are probably the more accessible neighbourhoods to live in. And so for me, it's been great because I don't have a car I love to be able to walk to different things. And as mentioned, it's super close to my work. A lot of government offices are located in the downtown core, and so if you work for government, chances are your office will be downtown. In my case, I'm with CNIB right now and it happens to be just two blocks from my current place, which is super convenient as well. So I, yeah, I advocate for these types of neighborhoods, if you can. But I do recognize that I'm somewhat privileged in that it's a good fit for me, as well as being a more accessible neighbourhood to live.

## Chloe: [00:40:27]

I agree with you. I mean, I have a physical impairment that affects a number of things and we've always chosen to live downtown. We've been talking about systems, they, them, they should do… What do we need to do in the community? What can we do to make our communities and our workplaces ourselves be more aware, more proactively inclusive of others?

## Marc: [00:40:51]

Probably taking the time to learn from people and listen to people, and I think that's incumbent upon people with disabilities as well when it comes to other groups. So I think we all have obligations to learn about Canada's history with Indigenous people as an example. And that's something that we all should be doing. Same thing when it comes to understanding race relations in Canada and that sort of thing. So like, we have those responsibilities as individuals, and I think there's similar responsibilities when it comes to learning about disability. And so, you know, listening to podcasts like this one will help people learn a lot about what the experience is like for people with disabilities. And once you know that once you understand that, then I think you're better equipped to do a couple of things. One might be to be an ally, right? And we can all use allies if you're if you're feeling like you're the only one who ever raises this issue. It gets draining. And when other people are also saying, you know what? We need to worry about accessibility, like I've had people who would advocate for accessibility that didn't affect them, like they were fully sighted, but they knew me and they wanted me to succeed. And having other people who themselves aren't affected but who want to take up the cause and be an ally is a huge help. And that starts with that education. So that's a big piece of how the community itself can undertake some actions that in the long run will, I think, result in a better, more accessible, inclusive environment for people with disabilities.

## Andrea: [00:42:38]

You're talking about a lot of things that sound very encouraging in terms of change, positive change. But in our last interview, I remember you were telling us about your job search challenges. And at the beginning when you were first trying to get into the working world, you were going to interviews. And I think a big decision for people who are at that stage, that early stage in their careers before they sort of built up their social networks and their social capital, whether or not to disclose before you actually get into the interview. And so can you tell us some of those about some of those experiences you had because those stories really resonate with people who really don't maybe have an understanding of what kind of barriers there are, just even to get your foot in the door.

## Marc: [00:43:21]

When I left CNIB in 2015, I didn't have a job lined up. I was fairly confident I could get one, but I didn't think it would be as difficult as it ended up being. And so for about four months, I was looking and applying on jobs and I was fortunate to get a temp job with the government. So I was through a temp agency but working for the government of Alberta and getting that job meant that I could at least pay the bills and I didn't have to move in with my sister, which was something I discussed with her because my financial situation was such that I was running out of out of the money that I had saved up. And so I, you know, because it was a temp job, I had to continue applying on jobs until I could land something permanent because there was just it was very precarious work. And so really, over the course of that full year, I was constantly looking for work and had about twenty-two interviews over that time. And so that was a discouraging time when you're when you're doing your 15th interview or your 17th interview and you're still getting that rejection, it's hard not to get your hopes up after each interview and then you get that rejection.

## Marc: [00:44:41]

So that was definitely a struggle when it came to staying motivated to continue looking. But if you're able to do that, I think that's sort of one of the only things you can do is just keep going because eventually, at least in my case, I was able to land that job. And once I got that first job, permanent position within the government, then I was really able to demonstrate to the to the folks in the government what an asset I could be. And that made it much easier, I think, to move into other positions in and around government because I had demonstrated my value and my supervisors and managers could speak to that sort of thing. So. So that was sort of some of the struggle with getting into the into the workforce was definitely having a lot of interviews, a lot of rejection, but just trying to keep going and eventually succeeding there.

## Andrea: [00:45:39]

Yeah. And the second part of that question was around disclosure. So would you disclose in your resume that you were visually impaired?

## Marc: [00:45:49]

The issue of disclosure is an interesting one in my experience. I think there are times when it's appropriate to disclose in a cover letter, but typically that would be where the lived experience is an asset and is actually something that they might be looking for in the job. So if I'm applying to the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, I will disclose in my cover letter that I am a member of the community and that I have that understanding of the barriers that people with sight loss experience. It becomes an asset in the in the in the search for that job. So that's a situation where I think it does make sense and there's many other situations like that where they are actually looking for that lived experience. Most jobs, though the majority wouldn't be, it would not be an asset. And so my default is not to have it disclosed in my cover letter or my resume. I would say anyone who's reading my resume carefully can probably guess based on the volunteer roles and some of the professional roles that I've had. And of course, if you want to Google Meet, there's enough media coverage and that sort of thing that that it will come up right away. So it's not something it's the fact that you don't mention in the cover letter does not mean that the person isn't maybe making some assumptions and maybe hasn't googled to see that you do have a disability. So it's not a guarantee that disability won't factor in as they're screening the resumes. But what I typically do is I won't disclose it in my application. If I get a call for an interview, that's the point where I will let them know.

## Marc: [00:47:32]

And I do it for a couple of reasons. One, I feel like I'm going to get a better reception if it's not a surprise that I just walk in with the dog and people might be taken aback a little bit. They may not have any negative attitudes, but it would just be a surprise and I'd rather not have the first thing, first impression be a surprise. So I'll let them know for that so that people can get a heads up that I, you know, I'll have a dog with me and I am blind. But there's a more practical reason, which is sometimes you'll have written assignments that are part of the interview process. And if you, you know, in my case, I'll need some type of accommodation. Usually it's a matter of just bringing my laptop or having them email me the assignment. It's a minor accommodation, but it's good to know ahead of time that, yes, there will be a written exam, and here's how we'll handle it. We'll have it emailed to me or I'll bring my laptop in. We've got a plan now to deal with it. So I find that's also a good reason why you might disclose before the interview. And the nice thing about that stage is they've already screened you in. They've looked at your resume, they've decided that you're qualified, at least to get the interview. And so you've kind of passed that first gate. And then and then I think after that, in my case, they're going to know as soon as I show up to the interview anyway. So I'll give them a heads up. And like I say, it can also help with getting accommodations in place,

## Chloe: [00:48:59]

Given that what would you advise a young person now who's in that transition? They've gotten an education. Education has become more accessible and they're now trying to move into the workforce. What would you? What do you remember what your sort of things you went now think, Oh, why did I do that or what really worked? And what would your advice be to them?

## Marc: [00:49:19]

In general, I would advise someone to keep a fairly open mind. So it might not be your dream job is your first job, but like I say with the government, you get your foot in the door. You get a job with the government. And now all of a sudden, there's a whole bunch of competitions that are only eligible for people who work in that organization. And lots of organizations are like that. They have internal competition. So I would say to be somewhat open minded in terms of the jobs you apply for, I know I applied on a variety. I was I always made sure that I felt I could do the job. I felt I had the right qualifications. But you know, it was quite a range of different types of jobs because of my degree is somewhat general, so I think teaches you or it makes you qualified to do a variety of types of work. And so I would apply on various positions. I would suggest that people do that. I would try. I would suggest volunteering as a way of gaining some experience because when you're just starting out and they're asking you questions about talk about a time when you experienced X or Y, you're not going to have those professional experiences to draw on if you're if you're just starting out.

## Marc: [00:50:34]

So you may be able to pull from your academic experiences or volunteer. So volunteering would be another piece of advice. One other one would be to know your technology as well as you can. So if you're someone who relies on assistive tech like a screen reader, as I do, it's not a it's not a simple piece of software to learn. I've been working with this piece of software for 20 years, and I still learn things and tricks and ways of doing things that I wasn't aware of, and I consider myself fairly advanced. Although there are plenty of others who are sort of in the tech space who would put me to shame when it comes to my knowledge of the screen reader. But because I have pretty decent skills, it means that doing tasks can be accomplished a bit more quickly. So if you are not as familiar with your technology, things like writing emails, formatting documents, surfing like surfing the internet and finding and doing research, they can take a little bit longer. And so if you know the tech better, it will make you faster and you'll be more competitive when it comes to looking for jobs and that sort of thing.

## Chloe: [00:51:49]

I've been thinking, Marc, if you could give yourself a trait that might make your life easier. What might that be?

## Marc: [00:51:55]

Yeah, that's an interesting one, too. I mean, I think the natural thought might be, you know, sight, and there's some interesting ways of thinking about that. And it's often a question as a as a blind person, you'll get, you know, isn't there a cure or a treatment? Is there nothing they can do? And I get where they're coming from. But the question does implicitly suggest that you would not like you would rather not be in the situation that you're in, that the kind of person you are is one that given another option you would choose not to be. And so I get the I get the question, but I do think there's some underlying assumptions about.

## Chloe: [00:52:39]

It's why I'm asking it because I think most able-bodied people would say, Oh, of course, we want to walk. I don't want to be blind, want to hear. And that's not necessarily the case, I gather.

## Marc: [00:52:48]

I think so. I mean, I will say, would it make my life easier? I think it would. But I also I often sometimes think, OK, what if I had been sighted my entire life? And I don't know exactly what the path I would have taken is. I do know that, you know, education was not super common in my family. And so there's a good chance, especially with the economy that we had here in Alberta, that I might not have gotten an education. I might have just went and worked in the energy sector where a lot of good paying jobs were available. And I think I mentioned earlier that education, like completely changed my life. And so I'm very grateful that I did end up end up going. And so the kind of the game where you ask yourself, like, would I be, would I be better off if I was sighted or not? I don't think it's as simple or straightforward. I do think it's the fact that I've gone through certain challenges has put my life in a in a certain direction. I've met people that I would never have met. I've had experiences that I would never have had. And so I just don't think it's as straightforward as saying, like, is it better to be sighted or blind? We're in a world that's set up for sighted people. There are many advantages and advantages to it. But I don't think that necessarily means that that we should try to, you know, that know that there's no benefits or you don't gain anything from having gone through these types of experiences.

## Chloe: [00:54:13]

I have braille on my business cards. I know that very few people actually read braille. Do you read braille? What are people with vision loss relationship to braille? Can you sort of because I think for the able-bodied public, they probably think everybody does. And just. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

## Marc: [00:54:28]

Yeah. With braille, it's actually a more complicated question. I attended a presentation as part of a part of a conference not that long ago where someone did sort of go through what you might think is a simple question how many people can read braille? How many blind people can read braille? You might think that's fairly simple, but it turns out how you define the term. Read how you define what counts as blind or low vision that complicates the question. And so in my case, I'm not someone who is going to sit down and read a book with braille. It would. It would be too cumbersome to take me too long. I can do it more efficiently using audio, whether it's human narrated audio, like an audible book or something off of my computer where my screen reader is reading it, I'm just that's going to be far more efficient. With that said, I still do use braille. When I go into elevators, I use it to label things around my house like my spices and that sort of thing. So am I someone who reads braille? I don't know. It depends on how you define the term read. So that's the way I look at it is it's a great skill to have. It will help you be more successful.

## Marc: [00:55:37]

It allows you to do things like to speak while you're reading, which is trickier to do if you are like me using a screen reader because then you are listening while you are speaking. And that's a bit trickier to do. I've figured out ways of doing it. But when you're doing presentations and you can like, I've listened to people, give speeches in when they're reading braille, and if you're good at it, it's, you know, you can't tell the difference between someone reading a piece of paper and reading a document in braille. But as I said, it does take quite a bit of work to develop that skill. So my guess is most people are like me. They know braille. They have the basics. They'll use it for elevators and simple labeling and that sort of thing. But in my experience, it's a small-ish percentage of people that use it to read large documents in that sort of thing. If I could advise my eight-year-old self who resisted learning braille, I don't think I'd be able to convince him because no one else was able to. But I would certainly say, like, this is a good skill to have, and you will find it valuable if you work at it.

## Chloe: [00:56:46]

Right, right. We have a lot of those things about our younger selves. Yeah. I mean, I primarily do it because I want to be an ally to people who are low vision, and it just makes people more aware that they can be more accessible in their approach to other people. Marc, I will say, I really appreciate you doing this. Thank you.

## Marc: [00:57:00]

Appreciate that.

## Andrea: [00:57:02]

Yes, likewise.

[music]

## Chloe: [00:57:13]

Thank you for listening. We hope you've enjoyed Broadcastability. You can find us on the Web at [theproudproject.ca](https://www.theproudproject.ca/) and [broadcastability.ca](https://www.broadcastability.ca/). You can also find us on social media at the Proud Project on LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube. And we're the ProudProjectCA on Instagram.

[music]

## Chloe: [00:57:39]

Broadcastability is produced by the Proud Project at Scarborough College at the University of Toronto and by Easter Seals Canada. The music in this podcast was composed and produced by Justin Laurie. Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon created Broadcastability’s cover art. She also edited this episode.

[music]

## Andrea: [00:58:08]

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