Broadcastability Season 2, Episode 7: A Conversation with Brian Petraits

00:00:00:12 - 00:00:15:02

Brian

From a management standpoint, you know, being clear in expectations and really outlining, “Okay, here are the goals. Here's what we're trying to accomplish. Now, how can we accomplish these things together?”

00:00:15:03 - 00:00:30:05

Chloë

Welcome to Broadcastability. We're a podcast by, for, and about people with disabilities. We're part of the PROUD project, which is a research institute affiliated with the University of Toronto. We're bilingual and a nonprofit charitable organization based in Toronto, Canada.

00:00:30:07 - 00:00:58:13

Isabelle

The Proud project is based at the University of Toronto Scarborough, which is on the traditional ancestral territories of Huron-Wendat, the Seneca and the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon works on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. We would also like to acknowledge the other Indigenous lands across Turtle Island, where we conduct our research and record this podcast.

00:00:58:14 - 00:01:23:04

Chloë

Hi, I'm Dr. Chloë Atkins, and I'm the lead investigator of the PROUD project. I'm a political scientist, actually a political and legal theorist at the University of Toronto, where I do work in health equity, anti-ableism, bioethics and human rights. As a person with an episodic disability, I also have lived experience with employment and disability.

00:01:23:05 - 00:01:38:11

Isabelle

My name is Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon and I'm a research assistant for the PROUD project. I'm also a PhD student at the University of British Columbia, where I research disability history. I identify as a person with invisible disabilities.

00:01:38:12 - 00:01:54:13

Isabelle

In today's episode, we welcome our guest, Brian Petraits the director of manufacturing for Bosma Enterprises. In this episode, Brian discusses his education, his experience studying engineering, his career journey, and Bosma Enterprises’ unique business model and social impact.

00:01:54:14 - 00:01:58:13

Isabelle

He also provides some advice for companies and workers.

00:01:58:14 - 00:02:24:09

Chloë

Yeah. What's interesting about Brian and this one, now we've done a number of episodes, is I think he brings up sort of similar themes that come across in other episodes that we can maybe talk about after the conversation. But, the two things that I note about this conversation is that one, he's one of a handful of individuals who has a disability, who is also a supervisor or an employer who's also supervising people with disabilities.

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Chloë

And he comes, in terms of the series of episodes, he's coming right after Brandon in France, who works for APF. What's interesting about this episode coming right after Brandon, is that Brian works for Bosma, which is a nonprofit. And both these industries, the one in France, APF, and this one as well, the these companies are focused on workplace inclusion of people with disabilities.

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Chloë

And what I find really interesting is, we sort of had a conversation after the Brandon, about whether these types of, this type of model works. In this instance, it does seem to work because he argues, he argues quite convincingly that there's quite a good profit, which they plow back into all sorts of things. The other thing I'll say before we lead off into him is, is you become aware of how hard he's worked like and what a good communicator he is, and those things have played a, I think, a large role in his success.

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Brian

Hi, my name is Brian Petraits. I'm currently the director of manufacturing for Bosma Enterprises out of Indianapolis, Indiana. I've been here at Bosma for about 16 years now, and in my day to day duties, I work to make sure that we are producing the proper products, in a timely manner and getting those out to the, customers who have requested those throughout the country.

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Brian

Bosma is a nonprofit organization, and we primarily provide disposable medical equipment to the VA [Veterans Affairs] network of hospitals throughout the United States.

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Chloë

Do you want to tell us a little bit more about, just your background, your childhood, where you grew up and how you... where you started?

00:04:05:08 - 00:04:40:04

Brian

Absolutely. Well, I'm currently 38 years old. I grew up in central Indiana, and I've lived in central Indiana, most of my entire life. I have a degenerative eye condition known as retinitis pigmentosa, or RP, which is a pretty common eye condition. But, in its simplest forms, I had night blindness and no peripheral vision. And over the course of my, as I've gotten older, my sight has progressively gotten worse to where it is now.

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Brian

In that, I'm pretty much totally blind. There may be a little bit of light perception, but, for about the last 20 years, I pretty much have been totally blind. So through the, the first 18 years of life, I lived a very, normal childhood in that I read print. Now, it was large print.

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Brian

You know, I was fortunate enough to be able to play youth sports and high school sports, football and wrestling.

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Chloë

I'm intrigued about your family.

00:05:13:08 - 00:05:49:13

Brian

I've got two younger sisters and they're they're they're awesome, awesome, awesome, you know, sisters. And and, you know, we work together to to get things done, you know, whether it be chores around the house or, you know, helping each other out. And so, you know, just because I was blind or am blind, you know, didn't exempt me from, you know, helping out with different tasks around the house and that included, you know, you know, dishes, that included laundry, you know, whatever.

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Brian

You know, those sort of tasks, but also, you know, helping with, you know, you know, meals, meal prep, clean up and, and, you know, wrapping presents, you know, whatever it may be. And so so it didn't exempt me from that, you know. And I credit my parents for instilling in us at a young age that, “Hey, you know, you know, Brian, you may do things a little bit different” or told my siblings, “Hey, you know, Brian may do things just a little bit different, but the expectation is still that that you're going to do it.”

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Brian

And, and, you know, there's a couple things we, we negotiated on, you know. Cutting the grass, the lines weren't, weren't always the straightest. And so, you know, we would, there was a little negotiation in that, you know, “Hey, you know, younger sister, you take care of cutting the grass and I'll do the dishes today.” You know, that, that sort of thing.

00:06:39:08 - 00:07:07:08

Brian

Or I'll take the trash out the next three days if you get the grass. But, but I think it's just it's just setting that bar and the expectations and that, you know, from a, from an educational standpoint, from a home management standpoint, from a discipline standpoint, it was, you know, I was just like my other two sisters and and I got in my fair share of trouble, you know, I... just like just like they did and and I deserved it, you know.

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Brian

So there's no special treatment.

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Isabelle

Yeah. Yeah. That's something we've we found. It's like a lot of folks we've talked to, the parents were like, yeah, you just, you know, you do things a little differently, but you're still going to do them. And it's, it's interesting how often chores come up that, that that's, I guess sort of a universal that every everyone's parents is, is like, it's got to be done, so we're all going to pitch in and do it.

00:07:30:05 - 00:07:30:15

Brian

Yup!

00:07:31:00 - 00:07:33:09

Isabelle

Yeah, yeah.

00:07:33:11 - 00:07:57:12

Brian

I attended the Indiana School for the Blind in Indianapolis for the first seven years of school, K through six, and that was a really good opportunity for me to understand more about my, my vision and understand more about my vision loss, for my family and understand about my vision and how best that I would learn and what kind of environments I would learn in.

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Brian

And so I learned a lot of fundamental skills at the Indiana School for the Blind, not only from an academic standpoint, but from a social standpoint, from a personal management standpoint, and decided once I finished my sixth grade year to transfer to my local public school. And that's where I finished out grades seven through 12 in a, in a public school setting.

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Brian

And, you know, like I mentioned that I was able to play sports. I've always... You know, I had had a visual impairment. I was considered legally blind at the time, so I was never able to, to drive, but, I did I was able to use some of my, some of my vision to help me in my school and social settings.

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Isabelle

So you did the first few years at the Indiana School for the Blind, and then you went to sort of the mainstream public school. What was that transition like?

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Brian

It was it was a tough transition. But what made it successful was that everybody was on the same page, and that included the, the school I was leaving, to the school I was going to, teachers, my family and myself. We were all on the same page. We knew that this was a good goal and something that was that was obtainable.

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Brian

If it's any one of those 4 or 5 entities, you know, had hesitations or didn't think it would work or just said, no, this is not something we want to we want to help. Then things would have broken down and been that much more difficult. So by everyone being on the same page and seeing that this was the best outcome for me, that that that made things really, really, helpful.

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Brian

I'd say two other things that also made things a smooth transition. One, the school system that I was transitioning to, like I said, was committed to making this work. And so they, brought on a, an instructor that was familiar with with blindness and familiar with, with adaptive technology. Now, I only worked with that that individual for, you know, one hour, you know, a day.

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Brian

And as I got older that time slowly, you know, decreased. And so, you know, it's kind of a co-op type of type of agreement where this teacher worked for, you know, 4 or 5 or 6 or 8 different school systems. But, that was because the, this the local school system that I was going into did not have an understanding of what was needed or what was out there.

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Brian

And so, there was someone that was kind of, you know, not only advocating on my behalf, but helping me understand, “Okay, hey, you know, we've advocated for this, you know this, this technology or for you to have your books on tape. Now, here's how to best utilize them. Here's how best to, to to to read through them and such.”

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Brian

So that was absolute number one. That was that was huge. And it would not have been a smooth transition without, without without her assistance. The other part of it was the community. Where where I transitioned to, and and and my wife and I, we love the community so much that's where we we reside now. And that's where our children are going through the same school system.

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Brian

The community itself is a an amazing community, a community that, you know, you know, embraced me and embraced my family and, and got behind and said, hey, we're going to make this work. And, you know, kids are kids. You know, were there tough days? Absolutely there were tough days. But there's tough days whether individuals can see or they can't see.

00:11:41:13 - 00:12:32:04

Brian

And, you know, that's just the human nature. That's just what happens when you put, you know, six hundred 11-, 12-, 13-, 14-year olds together, that's gonna happen. You know, there's a lot of a lot of a lot of changes for, for everybody. But for the most part, I went to a very, you know, embracing community and, you know, a community where, you know, I was treated as, as Brian, who just happens to be blind and not someone who's blind, you know, first. They they looked at me as the person first. You know, things that helped me with that: one, I was involved, you know, in some clubs and in the sports teams. So, you know, I... that is definitely a blessing. You know, I know not all individuals have that opportunity. You know, that really kind of help kind of break down that door and show that.

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Brian

Yeah. Hey, I'm just a normal person I may not be able to see very well, but I'm just a normal person. And that that allowed for kind of that, that transition to be helpful. But, you know, the specialized teacher who understood the technology, understood what it takes for someone who's going to be successful mixed with a very supportive community.

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Brian

That's what that's what made that transition, you know, successful. As I finished up during, during my senior year, I really had a loss of vision. And that was as I was transitioning from high school to my college years, which I attended Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, and studied, industrial engineering technology. And so that was a really not only a tough time for me...

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Brian

You're transitioning from high school to college. So that's a that's a that's a huge social, huge social change. I'd also, you know, was losing a lot of my vision very, very rapidly. And so that's when I really, began utilizing a white cane. I started really utilizing, you know, braille and tactile images in an academic setting and also the, screen reading technologies. I couldn't just get away with, with the enlarging the font.

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Brian

I really needed to start, understanding and utilizing the, the JAWS screen reading software. And so this is back in 2003, 2004. And that's kind of really when I started to understand adaptive technology, utilize it to its fullest. And, you know, for the last 20 years I’ve just kind of embraced it and have allowed for the, the technology to assist me in my, you know, my day to day, my day to day life.

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Chloë

Can you tell me a little bit about how that sort of evolved, and what the technology looked like as you moved through your career and what it looks like now? Where do you think it might go?

00:14:26:13 - 00:14:53:13

Brian

Absolutely. Well, my, college textbooks, originally were on cassette tape and I would, each, each semester receive a box that would contain, you know, 20 to 25 cassette tapes. And that would be a, an audio version of what was, you know, in the, in the physics book or the chemistry book or the calculus book or history book.

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Brian

And so that, the, those 20 to 25 tapes have now condensed down now to files that can be emailed and, you know, zip files, they can be emailed in a matter of seconds and transferred, you know, back and forth. And not only, you know, and then I'm also able to just open up a simple laptop, with a, you know, with the screen reading software on it, open that up and be able to start writing and, and and reading, looking up information, using keyboard commands to find certain phrases if I need to jump to it.

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Brian

You know, on a cassette tape, I would need to use a, you know, kind of a, a cheat sheet or a, glossary and realize, okay, I need to get to this chapter. So that's on, you know, cassette tape 17, side two. And so I need to find that and, you know, literally hit the fast forward button and just kind of hit stop and listen.

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Brian

Nope. I need to go a little bit further. And so, just, you know, it takes something that that would have taken 15, 20 minutes of research time to now I can do in 30 seconds. And, and also to it's so much more portable. I could do it on a phone. I could do it on a computer. I could do it, you know.

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Brian

You know, in a car. I could do it at home. I could do it at work. You know, it's just it's just so much more convenient. So that's just the evolution in in 20 years. This is what I really credit a lot of the, the companies who have built accessibility or at least kept accessibility in mind as they're developing.

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Brian

And, you know, and in the prime example is, you know, you look at Apple and, and the accessibility features they've built right into their phone. And so I can go to the store, buy a phone and open it up and and with one keystroke I... it's, it's just as accessible as the person, next person that's fully sighted that, you know, they're able to access their phone and it's, it's really cool that I'm not having to download extra software and add extra attachments on.

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Brian

Hey, it is you know, the phone has the accessibility features built right in. It doesn't cost any more, and it just makes things so much more on an equal playing field and allows for me to, to be able to enjoy the technology that's out there and also utilize it, you know, to its fullest. And I am not a big-time technology guy, but, you know, I've I've embraced what I need to embrace with it.

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Brian

And it allows for me to stay in communication with with family and friends and look up information and get directions and check email and it's it's nice that, that that technology is, is , the accessible technology is built right into the, you know, into the phone.

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Isabelle

How did you decide to go to university and which uni - or college, and which college? What... Yeah, what pushed you to go to college and how did you choose that and what was that, another transition, what was that like?

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Brian

Thankfully, we all had good grades and it was kind of did the, the expectation that that hey, after high school, you know, you... you know, the next step is, is to, to attend college or, or some sort of trade school, you know, type of thing. And so I think for, in their eyes, it was just like, well, that's that's just what, that's just what you do next.

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Brian

And, and thankfully, you know, you know, my sisters both are in the medical field and they attended, you know, post-secondary education as well. And so it was just kind of, that's just that's just what we do. You know, it was a transition - again, not only if you're sighted or not - you know, big transition going from, from a high school setting to a to a college setting.

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Brian

The high school I attended prepared me extremely well for, you know, for college, which was helped. And also I was going to a larger high school. So I went from a high school that had about 12, 13, 1400 students to, you know, a university that had 40,000 students. And so that's a it's a big jump, but it wasn't like I was going from, a high school with 100 students to a school with 40,000 students.

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Brian

So, big, you know, transition. I was really looking for, you know, a university, and I looked at 3 or 4 different universities. I was interested in the the STEM fields, and so that that kind of narrowed things down. And so I looked at kind of a small school, mid-sized school and larger schools and both, you know, public and private, and what ultimately drew me to to attending Purdue was that, it was an hour away from home, and so I was able to, you know, be away from home, but yet I was only an hour away from home. I wasn't six hours. I wasn't ten hours. You know, hey, if I needed something, I was I was only an hour away from home.

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Brian

Going to a large public school like, like Purdue also allowed for me to go in and I was not the first person who is blind to go through in an engineering or technology curriculum. And so that was a big, big selling point to me when I visited, I... there were 2 or 3 other students who were blind that were in, you know, somewhat similar, you know, technology-focused, you know, or engineering-focused majors.

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Brian

And so it wasn't that I was going to have the exact same professors or the same advisors, but there was an understanding or a climate or culture that said, hey, you know, we know how this works. We, we, we can make things be successful for not only, you know, you, but we can work with with instructors. And we've seen what has worked in the past.

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Brian

And so that was a huge selling point. You know, a couple of the smaller private schools that that I looked at, I would've been the first individual who was going to go in in sort of any of those, any of those fields, which was a little scary because you know, hey, it it very well could have worked, but if it didn't work, it was kind of like, well, was it because, you know, I didn't have the skills or the school didn't have the skills or a combination of, both to make this successful. So...

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Chloë

And you also would have been groundbreaking, which takes a lot of energy to create, forge a new path. It's sort of like taking the machete and hacking through the forest. Those who come after, don't quite have to do as much work, right?

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Brian

Exactly. Yeah. There were a few, you know, a few branches, a few roots I had to step over. But, you know, like your your analogy with the... I did not have to cut down big, big oak trees and underbrush. It was it was, you know, there was just a little bit of navigation that needed to be done. The heavy work had been cleared for me.

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Chloë

Yeah. And then you can concentrate on actually getting your education rather than always doing advocacy for yourself to get the education. I can I can really see that.

00:21:46:14 - 00:22:21:15

Brian

So originally I was really interested in civil engineering and that's, you know, looking at, not only the construction of, of, you know, bridges and waterways and in the aspects of, from a civil standpoint. And I realized really quickly that, I could probably do that, but the amount of detail and the amount of, vision required to be able to inspect in certain areas, it's just very, very, very difficult.

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Brian

And so, I wanted to be involved in some sort of engineering field, but, you know, that that initial outlook in civil was, was probably not not going to be in my best interest. And so that's why I was able to kind of broaden my, my scope a little bit and settled on industrial, which allows for me to get the engineering or the technology background, but also complement that with a business understanding of the the manufacturing process, the production process all the way through the entire picture.

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Brian

You know, sales, you know, and, and getting products shipped out from a logistical standpoint and then the associated cost to go along with that. And so the transition was, was aided a little bit in that, you know, I, I understood really quickly on that civil engineering may not be the best fit for me. And so opening that up to it, to industrial, which in turn then opened up a lot more career options and career paths. And so...

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Chloë

The transition as an early, young adult is difficult for most people. In, you know, that they're leaving school and what are they going to do next and trying to plan to move forward. How did that go for you?

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Brian

You know, from a transition standpoint of finishing college and going into the workforce, a couple of things that really made that transition be a success was one, having some internships throughout my college experience. Not only did those internships give me real life, real work experience, but it just, it grew my network of colleagues and friends and people in various industries as well. And also, you know, one of my internships, I lived outside of Washington, DC for, for a summer.

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Brian

And so it forced me to live on my own. And yeah, I was an hour away from college or from my home when I was in college, but now I'm 12 hours away and in a completely different city. And that that network of of family and friends who, yes, were an hour away. It's... it forced me to grow up even more, in a, in a new, new environment.

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Brian

But it was fun. It was a great, great, opportunity to, to grow, you know, socially and in a really challenging, you know, internship. So having those internships of real world experience really allowed for, for a smooth transition after college into, into the work environment.

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Chloë

Did those internships make... how did they accommodate you? Was that difficult to navigate?

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Brian

So that was, again, kind of dipping my toe into, into the work environment. And, and this was, again, a very, a two-way street, in that I needed to work with the various employers. And, you know, they were there being exposed to me. And so, thankfully, it was a really a really positive experience. And, you know, through my first internship, it was... I worked with, for, for three different companies, so three different summers,

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Brian

And so I was able to obviously build on what I learned in year one, with how to ask for accommodation and what I thought I needed or what was needed, and build that into year number two and then into into year number, year number three. But yeah, it was tough because I didn't know what to ask for. I didn't I didn't want to step on toes.

00:26:20:11 - 00:26:59:08

Brian

I didn't want to, you know, be greedy. But also I wanted to be successful. And so, it really took, employers, you know, from an internship, you know, understanding of, like, okay, hey, they want to make this work, I want to make this work. And we were able to to work together to, to accomplish those goals. But it was, you know, I was, you know, as I was, you know, drafting, once I had been accepted into the various programs or internship programs, you know, I would draft a message of, okay, you know, here's, you know, a couple of things that I'm going to need to be successful.

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Brian

You know, here's some resources. And yeah, yeah, I was really nervous getting ready to hit “send” on some of these, some of these messages because I did not know how how it would be taken. But it, it all ended up okay.

00:27:13:14 - 00:27:18:05

Isabelle

And so that was like after you'd already gotten the internship sort of thing.

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Brian

It was, yes. And and there was no surprises. You know, when I, when I interviewed, I disclosed, I, you know, transitioned, you know, while I was in college, utilizing a white cane to utilizing a guide dog. And I currently still, you know, I'm, I'm working with my third guide now. I use, you know, a combination of of a cane and a guide dog.

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Brian

And so, it was it was disclosed pretty early on that, “Yes, I am, I am blind,” in, you know, in the interviewing process. And this was, a lot of these interviews were done, you know, either on campus or, you know, via the phone. And so maybe the first screening, it wasn't it wasn't as as obvious. But once those in-person interviews, you know, took place, it was it was very obvious.

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Brian

And so I was very kind of upfront in disclosure of, of I do have a disability, you know, because I'm, I'm walking into a, you know, an interview room with a, you know, with a service animal. And so, you know, allowed for me to kind of go on the offense and explain, okay, hey, here's what I do, or here's the skill set that I can, I can bring, you know, here's my coursework, here's how I've been able to accomplish, you know, you know, doing these sort of equations in physics class and, and, you know, a lot of times, you know, the interviewer was, you know, was intrigued and said, “Tell me more about that.”

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Brian

And so it was a nice way to kind of kind of break the ice. And, and again, you know, again, were all the transitions, was it was always successful? No. You know, did I interview for a number of positions and were turned down? I absolutely was. Now, you know, the the short side of me says, “Oh, you know, they saw that I was blind and they weren't going to hire me.”

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Brian

You know, but I need to take a bigger view and realize, hey, there are some other more qualified candidates. And and so, yes, could that have ever played a, into the equation? It probably could. And it probably did, you know, to an extent for some of them, but also understanding that, hey, there may have been some other, you know, qualified candidates.

00:29:30:14 - 00:29:41:11

Brian

And so, you know, it kind of kept me, kept me going into find that, that internship that, that I was, you know, ultimately offered a position.

00:29:41:13 - 00:29:52:13

Chloë

So, two questions for you, there. Is... So you don't, in the original letter, divulge your blindness, if you're applying for a job. Or you don't, didn't habitually when you were younger?

00:29:52:15 - 00:30:18:12

Brian

When I was younger, I did not. Now, any sort of, you know, Google search, and my, my resume is to the point now where, you know... And I don't... Thankfully I've been I’ve been employed with my current current employer for 16 years, I'm extremely happy, and they've taken really good care of me here, so I've not had had to actively, you know, search, search for positions.

00:30:18:12 - 00:30:45:00

Brian

But I know now with, with with resume filters and buzzwords and keywords of how to get them through that those initial screening, you know, there's those screening type of things or get them to a hiring manager. I know things have changed definitely through technology in the last, you know, in the last 16, 20, 20 years. But, originally I did not disclose that on the initial, you know, cover letter on the initial resume.

00:30:45:01 - 00:31:12:12

Brian

But now, if I were to be actively seeking for a position, you know, not only would a simple Google search instantly pop up with, you know, with, with me and having a, you know, being blind. But some of my work on my resume that that is really applicable to a potential job, you know, would probably raise, you know, raise an eyebrow like, oh, okay.

00:31:12:12 - 00:31:37:13

Brian

Yeah. You know, this individual very well could be could be blind or a screener may, may, may flag that, so. But so, initial interview, no. But then after that, I would disclose just so I was not you know, the interviewer knew, “Okay. Hey, I'm going to be, you know, interacting with a person who's, who's blind, you know, they, you know, are they going to have their cane or a have a guide dog?”

00:31:37:13 - 00:32:13:12

Brian

And and I would also really, you know, work to make sure. Okay. Hey, where where am I going? What's kind of the lay of the land from a, a physical obstacle standpoint? You know, am I going to need to be weaving around a lot of desks to get to a certain place or weaving down hallways? And so if it were, if it was at an employer's location, obviously I couldn’t scout that out ahead of time. If it was at a neutral location, you know, maybe at a, at a college career center or at a, local, you know, kind of a banquet hall where there's, you know, an interview fair type going on.

00:32:13:13 - 00:32:23:06

Brian

I could go in there a little bit ahead of time and navigate and understand, okay, here's the lay of the land. Here's what I'm going to do. But I usually still would would disclose that on the front end.

00:32:23:07 - 00:32:45:04

Isabelle

Yeah. I like what you said about sort of going on the offensive and like preempting any fears by... or like misconceptions by just right off the bat talking about it. A lot of folks we've talked to, both disabled or not disabled, it really comes through that internships and co-ops and job experience, like during your studies, is a really, really helpful thing.

00:32:45:05 - 00:32:58:06

Isabelle

I'm wondering, like, was that part of your program? Did your university support you in finding those internships, or was that, was it all you just kind of going into the world and looking at who had internships? Like, how did you find those those positions?

00:32:58:07 - 00:33:26:04

Brian

Absolutely. Yeah. And it was it was not a requirement through through my program or through my major. It was just a you know, as as you talk as a freshman in college, you know, you're talking to, older students and you see that, the importance of what they needed to get to. Or recent graduates are like, “Oh, I if I didn't have this internship, I wouldn't have gotten this job.”

00:33:26:04 - 00:33:45:15

Brian

Or, you know, things like that. You realize really quickly, hey, internships are golden. That you really want to try and try and get those. And so, it was it was driven by me, you know, I knew that I wasn't I wasn't going to be, the person that, there weren't going to just come hand you an internship.

00:33:45:15 - 00:34:03:02

Brian

You got to go out and find it. And especially if it's in a location that is desirable for you, you know, hey, there may be an internship, but it's across the country and you're going to have to pay for housing and and things like that. Well that, yeah, it's great there's an internship there, but that's not that's not feasible for me right now.

00:34:03:02 - 00:34:32:08

Brian

And so, if I want to find that the internship that was going to make me successful, I needed to do that on my own. And so definitely, you know, my university supported me on that, but it was is it was self, self-guided and self-directed by, you know, by me because I understood the importance of that, you know, that work experience, you know, thankfully, because of older students or, you know, individuals in their careers that say, “Hey, this is important.”

00:34:32:08 - 00:34:51:08

Brian

And I, I understand the importance. So that's what I really try and stress to, college age individuals now is, is, hey, you know, get that experience when you can even if it's, you know, ten weeks in the summer, that looks really good on a resume. And it just it builds some confidence for you moving forward as well.

00:34:51:10 - 00:34:59:10

Chloë

And in terms of... did you have part-time jobs that you did in high school or, other than the internships during college or...?

00:34:59:12 - 00:35:24:00

Brian

Yeah. So throughout, high school, I, I played sports, but it allowed for, you know, part, part of the summer to work kind of odd jobs. At the time, the community I was living in, you know, had some, some rural or farm aspects to it. And so I did a lot of baling hay, which, again, that, you know, taught me about hard work right off the bat.

00:35:24:02 - 00:35:24:15

Isabelle

Yeah

00:35:25:07 - 00:35:47:01

Brian

And such. And so that was, that was that was a good way. And again, I was with friends. We had we had a wonderful time, you know, as much, wonderful time, if you can say, when it's 90 degrees and you're, you're baling hay. So just just odd jobs around, you know, around town, you know, parking cars for the, for the local races, you know, that, that sort of thing.

00:35:47:03 - 00:36:14:05

Brian

But then when I was in, in college, I really, you know, kind of buckled down and, and I wrote, sports for the, the local newspaper. And that was, you know, I had played sports my entire life. I was at a Division one Big Ten institution. I knew that, you know, as much as I would have loved to have played sports at the collegiate level, you know, my my skills were... I was not a Division one athlete.

00:36:14:06 - 00:36:40:14

Brian

And so, I got to do the next best thing and, and write about it. And so I felt like that being able to write about the sports, one, it allowed for me to stay involved with the sports that I loved, it allowed for me to better understand how the how the university, you know, worked and operated, but also from a career standpoint, I knew I was going into a a technical major.

00:36:40:15 - 00:37:17:13

Brian

And, you know, there's, you know, so many stereotypes about, you know, engineers, and they can't communicate, and things like that. So it's like, okay, I, you know, I'm going to utilize this time to, to grow in my communication style both, you know, orally and through writing. And so I did, I worked all four years while, while I was an undergrad for the, for the local newspaper, you know. And again, just, you know, it was paid, it was, you know, just a couple bucks, you know, that was paid, but the opportunities and the experiences were were awesome.

00:37:18:00 - 00:37:37:05

Brian

You know, being able to do a little bit of travel, with the, the various sports teams, but then also, you know, learning to work on deadline and, “Okay, hey, the game’s over at, you know, 10:30 at night while the papers got to go to press by, you know, in in 35 minutes.” And you need to be factual.

00:37:37:06 - 00:37:54:14

Brian

You need to be, you know, you know, have good, good grammar and things like that. So, so that was a that was a fun, fun job, it allowed for me to have a lot of really cool, you know, access. But then also, at the end of the day, it really helped me with some of my, my communication.

00:37:54:14 - 00:38:00:04

Brian

And, and again, it put a couple other dollars in my pocket too, which is, which is fun at the end of the day.

00:38:00:05 - 00:38:10:05

Isabelle

So, so once you graduated, how did you then sort of transition into to the workplace? Like, what sort of, jobs did you get after after graduating?

00:38:10:07 - 00:38:34:07

Brian

So this is really important - based on the internship, because one of the the intern, the summers that I interned, is the company I ultimately am working with now for, for 16 years. And so, that's kind of, you know, my personal push of why internships are so important because of the network and the people that you are able to, to meet.

00:38:34:07 - 00:39:09:08

Brian

And so, as I was concluding my senior year of of school, I had an idea of what I wanted to do. And I interviewed for a number of a number of positions and, thankfully, you know, just by staying in contact with, you know, prior, prior managers in those, through through the various internships I had and, and maybe not direct managers, but, in other departments, you know, they were able to say, “Okay, hey, we've got this opportunity coming up and over here, maybe we have something coming up, you know, that you may apply for.”

00:39:09:09 - 00:39:32:15

Brian

And so, I was, I had applied for a, for a number of positions, but when a, when a position became available, became available through a company that I had, interned with as a, as a after my freshman year, I was able to to interview and they extended an offer and I accepted it. And was very, you know, grateful for that that opportunity.

00:39:32:15 - 00:39:50:08

Brian

And and you know, like I said, it's it's it's Bosma, that's where I'm at now. And they were they were gracious enough to, even though I had interviewed and accepted the position, you know, in the winter, you know, they they held it for me until I graduated in, in May. And so that was that was really, really awesome of them.

00:39:50:08 - 00:39:58:14

Brian

And so I'm, I'm so grateful that they, you know, kind of held that for me for, for six months until I finished up my, my education.

00:39:59:00 - 00:40:04:15

Isabelle

And what was the first position like, what was the job title?

00:40:05:00 - 00:40:42:04

Brian

So I came in in a, like kind of an industrial management type of, you know, type type of role in, in a light manufacturing environment. And so, the first, first few years really spent a lot of time understanding the, the production environment, the buying and selling, of goods, you know, raw components and then how that, you know, interacts from a, how you produce those in an efficient manner.

00:40:42:05 - 00:41:06:04

Brian

But then the other big part of it was there was there was a little bit of of, you know, entry level supervision, that was also assigned with, with the job. And so that gave me an opportunity to, you know, put some, some, some theories in practice that, you know, you learn from a leadership standpoint. And, and again, that that was a that was tough.

00:41:06:04 - 00:41:29:11

Brian

And the the management staff that I was working under was very supportive because, you know, you have an individual that's that's it's 24, 25 that's, you know, now asked to, you know, be in a supervisory role of maybe someone that's been at the company for 40 years and is 65 years old, you know, you're you're supervising someone that's that's twice the age.

00:41:29:11 - 00:42:10:10

Brian

So that was, you know, they they started me off, you know, slow in, in that realm, in, in a positive way allowed for me to kind of, you know, grow and and I made mistakes. I definitely made some mistakes, you know, early on. I still make plenty of mistakes now, but try and use those opportunities as as growing opportunities to understand, okay, how best to, you know, to relate and, and really make sure that I'm, I'm leading in in a manner that, that, you know, pushes individuals to want to to want to do their best.

00:42:10:11 - 00:42:33:13

Brian

And so that was kind of the entry, entry level, you know, position. And then you know, throughout the 16 years, my responsibilities are, have, have expanded, but it's still the same, you know, core at the end of the day, hey making sure we have, you know, the right people in the right place to, get products efficiently out the door.

00:42:33:14 - 00:42:44:13

Chloë

Can you tell us a little bit about your employer? Because it's a it's it's unique. It sounds like. So can you describe it a bit? And what, what it does?

00:42:44:14 - 00:42:45:08

Brian

Yeah. So, yeah.

00:42:45:08 - 00:42:46:11

Isabelle

And like your current position. Yeah.

00:42:46:13 - 00:43:12:14

Brian

Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. Bosma enterprises, we've got about 200 employees. We are a nonprofit. And what what makes us a nonprofit is that we employ and empower a lot of individuals who are blind. And why we do that here in the United States, the unemployment rate for people who are blind is between 60 and 70%, which is just astronomical.

00:43:13:00 - 00:43:37:03

Brian

It is. It is it is way, way too high. And so, what we do here at Bosma on, we've got kind of two sides of our business. On the manufacturing or the industry side of the business is we're, creating products that are ultimately sold to the, the VA network in a disposable medical realm throughout, throughout the country.

00:43:37:04 - 00:43:50:06

Brian

We then in turn, take the, the profits that, that we receive from the sale of those goods and we're, we're about a 90 to $95 million organization. And so we take the profits that we...

00:43:50:07 - 00:44:00:15

Isabelle

Does that... Sorry, just real quick, does that mean, like, that's that's your, like, your operating budget or your profits or your...? The the $95 million?

00:44:00:15 - 00:44:03:01

Brian

That's our revenue, our revenue for the year.

00:44:03:01 - 00:44:05:08

Isabelle

Okay. Wow. Wow. Okay.

00:44:05:10 - 00:44:41:12

Brian

It's about 90 to $95 million a year. And so we then take, you know, in, in... You know, the beauty of what we're, what we're doing is that, regardless of sight, all individuals here, are paid the, with the same benefit package offered. The same the same exact benefit package. You know, we, we strive to to create an employer of choice and so that, you know, any individual, we are not a sheltered workshop by any means.

00:44:41:12 - 00:45:08:03

Brian

Every individual here is is paid, you know, well above minimum wage. You know, we have we have bonus opportunities. We have, you know, raise opportunities. And part of our mission or the, the, the unique thing about our organization is that, like I said, we want to empower individuals who are blind to meet their, you know, economic and and various goals.

00:45:08:04 - 00:45:35:04

Brian

And so, a number of individuals on our leadership team are also blind. And so we're always looking for opportunities to, you know, promote if someone is, has the skills and are qualified and there's a position available. You know, we're always going to look to hire someone who is blind to fill those roles. And so that is the the manufacturing or the industry side of the business.

00:45:35:05 - 00:46:04:13

Brian

What we then do in turn is we take those those profits after we've, you know, paid all of our bills and, and make sure that, you know, that our building’s taken care of and that all the insurance premiums, everything's been paid. We take those profits and we put those into our rehabilitation side of the business. And in our rehabilitation side of the business is a we we, we take part in both in-home and center-based rehabilitation for individuals who are blind.

00:46:04:14 - 00:46:27:00

Brian

And and that could be individuals who are newly blind or individuals who have been blind their entire life. And we will meet them where they're at and help them, you know, develop a plan for what their goals are and where they want to be, you know, in life. And that can be anything from, you know, a student to... you know, training them,

00:46:27:00 - 00:46:45:07

Brian

“Okay. So here's what you're going to need to be successful in a college setting.” That could be an individual, maybe they're they're in a law career, they're they're a lawyer and they lose their sight. Well hey, we're going to teach you everything you need to know to regaining that independence so that way you can go back to doing the job that you love doing.

00:46:45:08 - 00:47:06:02

Chloë

This is an opportunity because not only are you an employee, but you manage people who are blind. And I'm wondering how you think about that and what advice you would give others when you're when you're managing an individuals who are blind, what you have to think about, how to make sure that they are experiencing the most productive and engaging, job that they can.

00:47:06:03 - 00:47:34:00

Brian

So a big thing is, is to understand that, be clear in your goals, in your expectation, and make sure regardless of sight, because there's individuals who are blind that are on, on our team, there's individuals who are who are fully sighted, and everything in between. And and blindness does not discriminate. There's there's there's blindness in all aspects of, you know, of of our society.

00:47:34:02 - 00:48:11:00

Brian

And so number one is just just being fair and consistent in how you how you manage, with an understanding that there may be an accommodation that's, that's needed. And so from an accommodation standpoint, most of the time those accommodations are very, very low cost. That that they can allow for that individual who is blind to be just as productive as their sighted peer, you know, again, at a very, very low, minimal or no cost, you know, from a, from an accommodation.

00:48:11:02 - 00:48:48:09

Brian

And so, yes. Will some extra technology cost a, cost a little bit? Yeah. But that's a, that's a, that's a one time investment. It may only be $500 or $1000. You invest that one time. And now that, that individual who's blind has access to everything on the computer that is, that is needed to, to perform their job. From a management standpoint, again, as I mentioned, you know, being clear in expectations and really outlining, “Okay, here are the goals. Here's what we're trying to accomplish. Now, how can we accomplish these things together?”

00:48:48:11 - 00:49:00:00

Chloë

What would you advise somebody who's coming out of school or is in high school who has a disability, or they're blind, or not, about their careers, what they should sort of think about in order to have a career?

00:49:00:01 - 00:49:23:07

Brian

So for for young individuals who are in high school or college, a couple of pieces of advice. Number one, network as as best you can with individuals, whether they're in your career field or not, because you never know, how those paths are going to cross in the future. Get involved in activities, especially at the high school and the college level.

00:49:23:11 - 00:49:48:06

Brian

Get involved in clubs and they don't have to all be related to your major or your field of study, you know, hey, if you're interested in something, you know, you're interested in ballroom dancing, go do ballroom dancing. Go, go have fun. Enjoy what you're doing. You know, don't let your your school studies, you know, suffer. But go and have fun and learn about what else what else is out there.

00:49:48:07 - 00:50:15:14

Brian

Third key is get some sort of work experience. And it does not, you know, an internship or a co-op is is ideal, would be wonderful, especially one that is paid. But if it if it's a part time job or a volunteer opportunity, find something that is going to be able to be added to your resume, that you're going to be able to get those those work experience.

00:50:15:14 - 00:50:44:07

Brian

Because so many times for for us who have a disability, especially so those who may be blind, understanding the workplace etiquette is so important, you know, and and you don't want to come into your your first day at a job or, you know, you don't want to go into that first interview and not understand, you know, the etiquette aspect of working in an office setting or in a clinical setting, those sorts of those sorts of things.

00:50:44:07 - 00:51:09:01

Brian

And so, you know, by having those experiences while you're young and you have, you know, you know, you know, managers and mentors who can help guide you through, you know, you're not going to be perfect on day one, but they can help. “Okay, hey, it's you know, it's probably a good idea, you know, you turn your, your notifications off your phone so it's not binging and and ringing, you know, throughout a meeting.”

00:51:09:01 - 00:51:29:14

Brian

Or, “Hey, here's the best way to to answer email in a professional manner.” Or, you know, “You don't always have to, you know, reply back in these sort of situations.” Just some of those office etiquette things that you can't learn in a classroom are so so important and allows for you to... Even coming into a coming into a meeting room.

00:51:30:02 - 00:52:00:09

Brian

How do you gracefully come in to a meeting room and you're not, you know, bumping into a lot of different things? Or how do you gracefully step out of the meeting room if you need to run to the restroom? That, that sort of thing, you know, allows for you to do that in a, in a setting as, as a, as a student or as a, high school or college student that that may be a little less intimidating than than once you get, you know, past that, past that, that first entry level position.

00:52:00:10 - 00:52:03:12

Chloë

These are great, great pieces of advice.

00:52:03:13 - 00:52:38:15

Brian

The final thing is, is, again, you know, once you're once you're in your career, you know, don't be afraid to advocate for what you need, but do that in a, a respectful, collaborative manner. You know, especially here in the United States, there are some various, you know, laws, you know, with, with, you know, accommodations and ADA and access, you know, types of types of laws that are, that are in place, but come at it in a collaborative, “Hey, let's work together to try and figure this out.”

00:52:39:00 - 00:53:01:11

Brian

And and not come in with a chip on your shoulder on day one and say, I need this, this, and this. I mean, you want to stand up for what you need, but you want to do that in a respectful manner that’s that's going to create those positive relationships with your with your coworkers, with your with your supervisors, and, you know, with with your, with your HR staff.

00:53:01:12 - 00:53:07:09

Chloë

What do you think the future of working looks like in the US for people with disabilities?

00:53:07:10 - 00:53:39:10

Brian

So in the US, I really want to see that unemployment rate continue to, to decline. You know, technology has been a great equalizer for a lot of individuals with with disabilities. I also think that the public perception in the mindset is, is changing regarding the abilities of those who may have a disability. And so, you know, in 20 years, I'd love to see, again, lower unemployment rates.

00:53:39:12 - 00:54:16:02

Brian

I'd love to see, you know, a continued acceptance of individuals who who may have have a disability. And ultimately, I I'd love to see access continue to be built in from the ground floor, whether that, physical access, you know, in a building, in a neighborhood, you know, in a street, you know, or virtual access, you know, understanding web pages and design, and being able to make sure that the software is compatible across the various various platforms.

00:54:16:06 - 00:55:08:14

Brian

And so I see a a positive step. I see a time where there’s going to be more individuals who are going to be, you know, employed or employable. And I hope to see more employers, you know, hire those individuals who may have a disability based on, based on their merits, in their ability and not as a result of “I need to check a box” or “I need to have a certain, you know, meet a meet a certain quota,” you know. The other part of this too, is that individuals with disabilities, need to take it upon ourselves, to educate ourselves, to make sure that we have the information and the tools to be qualified for the jobs that are out there.

00:55:08:15 - 00:55:31:15

Brian

And, you know, like I mentioned earlier, technology, you know, has evolved over time to allow for individuals with disabilities to be successful. It's allowed for us to be able to, you know, go to school to gain education in various fields, not all fields, but in, but in a lot of fields.

00:55:32:01 - 00:56:01:01

Brian

Now it's up to us to to take advantage of those resources that are out there, make sure that we are qualified for the particular jobs that are that are going to be coming available, you know, in the next, you know, in the next few few years, whether that be on the technology front, whether that be, you know, in, in the scientific front, you know, we need to qualify ourselves to make sure that we're ready to go when these jobs become available.

00:56:01:03 - 00:56:14:13

Chloë

Look, I wanted to thank you so much for doing this and for sharing your expertise and your experience, with hopefully with our audience and, and, we really appreciate the time that you've put into this and the thought.

00:56:14:14 - 00:56:30:09

Isabelle

So several, several themes come up in Brian's interview. And I think we just wanted to touch on a few of them. Like a lot of our guests have mentioned, adaptive technologies really do make a huge difference in people's lives. What's interesting is Brian talks about how they've evolved over the past few decades.

00:56:30:09 - 00:56:31:00

Chloë

Yeah

00:56:31:01 - 00:56:52:02

Isabelle

I was I was absolutely just bamboozled by the idea of cassette tapes for engineering textbooks and the fact that Braille versions of the textbooks were like 18 volumes. And it's it's really cool to see how much that's changed, how far it's come, how much easier it is to use.

00:56:52:02 - 00:57:10:15

Chloë

From my perspective, it’s generational, because I was thinking, for me, I was really aware of how much that stuff is because I'm older than you, right? It's... there are decades between us. And so I was also thinking about our first interview of the year, which was with Vincent, who works in, in computer technologies, for, I believe for Apple, partially as well.

00:57:10:15 - 00:57:25:07

Chloë

But he's, he's doing work to develop technologies and perfect them, and here's Brian who's using them. Right. And, and they're both blind and they're, you know, being quite successful in their careers. So, that, like, made it apparent to me.

00:57:25:08 - 00:57:27:01

Isabelle

Yeah, absolutely.

00:57:27:02 - 00:57:53:04

Chloë

The the other thing that I came up interesting was, is, parental expectations. And it reminded me of our conversation with Matilda, the, playwright in, in the UK, who talked about her mum sort of insisting that chores got done regardless of her disability and even as her... like Brian, she had has a disability that degenerated. Brian had eyesight that was degenerating, but nonetheless, his parents expected him to mow the lawn.

00:57:53:04 - 00:58:08:12

Chloë

And even if it was, you know, a little askew. There were... he was expected to pitch in. And I think those... that sense of that they that they had something to contribute, I think plays a large role in these types of individuals moving forward and contributing later.

00:58:08:13 - 00:58:41:14

Isabelle

Yeah. Yeah. And, and that along with that came the expectation, like Brian talks about, you know, his sisters went to post-secondary so he was expected to go to post-secondary. It was just sort of yeah, just expected. And that has a huge, huge impact on, yeah, what people are doing. Another thing I thought was really interesting, that he mentioned more than any other interviews we've talked... we've had this season, about internships, and sort of during the university experience, internships and how valuable they are.

00:58:41:15 - 00:59:10:05

Isabelle

Like, you're gaining experiences, you're building on-the-job skills, you’re making connections. And you often have, you know, university support to help find internships, though, as Brian said, like, for him, you had to go out and find it. But because it's part of, often.... Like internships maybe for employers are sort of a lower risk, that they're willing to maybe step outside their comfort zone in hiring a student because they know it's for a fixed term, they know it's a student internship, that it might be sort of a lower barrier to entry?

00:59:10:06 - 00:59:30:01

Chloë

I think. I think you're right. I think you're right. I mean, I think a couple of... somebody’s talked about “stages” a bit in France, about having internships, sort of trying to pursue them. Not... I think not getting them, actually. Maybe that was... But the thing about internships that I think, that I was thinking as he was speaking was that, we never really asked about income, with regard to them.

00:59:30:01 - 00:59:39:12

Chloë

And most people with disabilities, people with disabilities are the one of the poorest segments of the population, and they're not, couldn't necessarily take on an internship that wasn't properly

00:59:40:00 - 00:59:40:08

Isabelle

That wasn’t paid.

00:59:40:10 - 00:59:51:02

Chloë

Yeah. Remunerated. So I think the financial consideration, while it is a less committed form of trying to, of getting someone with a disability into the workforce, it maybe inaccessible to a lot of people, right,

00:59:51:05 - 00:59:51:14

Isabelle

Yeah, very true.

00:59:51:14 - 00:59:53:07

Chloë

because of financial considerations.

00:59:53:07 - 01:00:15:08

Chloë

But in... He's, as I said at the beginning, he's really quite a good communicator. He's obviously makes a lot of effort. He also talks... I think most, I think everyone we've spoken to who's who has eventually used a guide dog and has found a guide dog very facilitative if they're blind. And, talking. I mean, we're talking about technology, there

01:00:15:08 - 01:00:40:00

Chloë

that's a kind of a low-tech technology. I mean, it's it's and it's interpersonal. And it comes back to this mix of, where you have, you know, technologies matter a great deal, as you say. I mean, you really rightly point out how much he's used them, but also he points out how much the guide dog helps him, he can trust him, it's a good relationship with him. But also with other people. It breaks down barriers. And everyone has said that, right?

01:00:40:01 - 01:01:07:03

Isabelle

Yeah, and it's sort of like an icebreaker that, you know, people love dogs and it's sort of it's a way of, you know, meeting new people. And as you said, yeah, really great communication skills. And it was cool to see how Brian really prioritized skill-building, even outside of his formal education. Like, a lot of sports where you build teamwork, interpersonal communication skills. He worked for a newspaper working on written communication skills like, wow, that is

01:01:07:05 - 01:01:09:00

Chloë

rare for an engineer, right?

01:01:09:01 - 01:01:15:15

Isabelle

Yeah. Yeah. But he he pointed that out. He's like, I need to up this skill. So that's what he did. And I thought that was really cool.

01:01:16:00 - 01:01:31:02

Chloë

Yeah. I mean he's a he's a wonderful mix. I mean, as we think about it, of sort of soft skills and and technological resources as well that, that, that he’s brought to bear. But I found this a really interesting conversation.

01:01:31:03 - 01:01:53:03

Chloë

Thank you for listening. We hope you've enjoyed this episode of Broadcastability. You can find us on the web at broadcastability.ca And theproudproject.ca. You can also find us on social media at “Teh PROUD Project” on LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube. And we're the proudprojectCA on Instagram.

01:01:53:04 - 01:02:14:10

Isabelle

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01:02:14:11 - 01:02:38:10

Isabelle

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