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Disability Matters Special Edition

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:



Dear friends:

Welcome to a special edition of The Wave, featuring stories and photos from Springboard’s 2016 Disability Matters Europe Conference and Awards which took place at AXA, Paris, France on June 23rd and 24th, 2016. If you were in attendance, reading this issue will allow you to re-experience the information, education, celebration and networking that this event brought. For those who could not attend, you will immediately realize that you missed a content-rich event; thanks in large part, to our honorees sharing their disability journeys, our Keynote presenter and other subject matter experts.

AXA, our event host and partner, not only helped to make this year’s Europe event a huge success, they clearly illustrated their own corporate commitment to the mainstreaming of individuals with disabilities in their workforce and workplace; in addition, AXA served as key members of the Disability Matters family.

By participating in Disability Matters Europe and reading these articles, I hope you learn from these companies’ successes so they can become yours as well.

Wishing you a most successful year and looking forward to seeing you at Springboard’s 2017 Disability Matters Europe Conference & Awards Gala.

Your friend and Springboard’s CEO,

Nadine’s Message	1
Maya Hagege	2
Fabrice Roszczka	3
Mental Health in the Workplace	6
Stephanie Dumas	9
Sophia Gosselin	13
Marketplace Award	17
BNP Paribas Fortis Clair Godding	18
Orange Rocio Miranda de Larra	20
Workplace Award	23
AXA Carmel O’Brien	24
Welcome Reception Photos	26
Disability Champion Award Honorees	27
Cisco Mayte Cubino Gonzalez	28
Award Photos	31

Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



The AFMD (French Association of Diversity Managers) is a place for thinking and sharing diversity management practices. We address all types of managers and have a multidimensional approach: age, gender, social & educational background, disability... We work with universities, business schools, institutions and companies on operational research. We organize workshops and conferences in order to promote innovative solutions. We mobilize the wisdom of the crowd to co-produce publications.

In 2012, some of our members showed interest in working on career path of people with disability, a matter little-addressed in France. 14 companies participated in 8 workshops to explore what was done about career development in all aspects of the diversity policy: HR process, sourcing, training, assessment, monitoring, etc. The exchanges and reflections led to the production of an e-book, which has four objectives:

- **To help** managers and HR professionnels to better understand the obstacles and levels to career development of people with disabilities;
- **To show** the actual actions that are settled by specialized departments on site (projects, tools, indicators, etc.);
- **To report** innovative projects on inclusion and job retention of disabled workers;
- **To question** the experiences of key players about policies and practices.

With 5 Chapters, 42 case studies and learnings in France, in Europe and in the world, 10 experts' perspectives, 9 videos produced by AFMD, 9 videos of contributors and about 10 references including existing tools, AFMD undertakes several topics.

For more information: <http://www.afmd.fr/>

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Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



« **Dans le noir ?** »/Ethik Investment Group

Think Outside of the box »: How to innovate and create value through Diversity

It has been 12 years that Ethik Investment group is a real **social innovation lab**.

We employ 50 % of people with disability in our work force without any support from the government.

We have developed the **restaurant chain "Dans le Noir ?"** (Paris, London, Barcelona, Saint Petersburg) where you can have this unique sensory, social and human experience to eat a surprise menu, in pitch dark guided by blind people. We did also some **pop up restaurants** all around the world (Warsaw, Geneva, New York, Bangkok, Ryadh, Nairobi, Saint Andrews...).

We also have created **"Dans le Noir ?" the spas** (Paris, Bordeaux) , where you are welcome by blind practitioners and **"Dans le Noir ?" the sensorial Shop** (Paris) where the blind people become the ambassadors of good products and producers.

We are coming from the field where we are doing some concrete experimentations, and we are sharing our know-how and expertise with other companies through our B to B department Ethik Connection.

We have 3 departments:

Ethik Event

The event department that designs and organises **tailor made and turnkey events** for big companies and institutions worldwide. Ethik Event has **indoor solutions and also mobile facilities**.

Disability Matters - 2016

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

The areas of expertise are:

- Sensory marketing: product promotion, product tasting, product launching, to rediscover a product in pitch darkness
- Team cohesion: team building, brainstorming and other incentives
- Raising awareness about disability toward ludic and innovative workshops

Depending on our customer's needs, we provide different kind of solution:

- "Dans le Noir ? the Dark Lab": Experiences in pitch darkness guided by blind experts such as diners, product tastings brainstormings etc. The Dark Lab is a construction which is flexible, safe and especially made by Ethik Event experts.
- "Sensory cocoon": A moment of well-being with our blind practitioners that provide massages to the guests.
- "Silent Café": an immersion in the world of deaf people. Guests use non-verbal communication and sign language to order coffee, tea and snacks.
- "Dans le Noir ? Otra Vista Social Club": you can meet the diversity through this innovative party concept where the guests are wearing headsets to enjoy the music of their choice between two different atmospheres played by our two DJs. Deaf animators are here to help the participants to communicate through sign language and use non-verbal communication to order their drinks at the "Silent Bar". The guests can also visit our "Dark Chill Out", a room in pitch darkness where they are welcomed by blind people and where they can enjoy music lounge and eat tapas.

Here is a 1.30 minute video that illustrates our events: **Ethik Event Video**

Our belief : « A good experience is better than a long speech ! ».

Ethik Management

Our consulting and training department which helps companies to integrate the disability with a pragmatic approach based on the creation of value. For example they integrate some blind people in the research departments of L'Oréal and Danone.

Ethik Image

This department aims to create some communication campaign, websites and print.

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Disability Matters - 2016

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

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"There is no darkness but ignorance" William Shakespeare



Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



Akiko Hart



Richard Frost

1. Are incidences of mental health issues affecting the workplace increasing and if so – why?

Over the last 10-20 years, we have seen an increase in the number of people being affected in their work by stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions. But not all such incidences are work-related – indeed, the most common cause of long term sickness absence are non-work related difficulties: issues that people are struggling with outside of work. In those situations, the work place may well be the safe place – somewhere they feel fulfilled and supported, have a routine and a purpose and contact with others.

Non-work stressors such as those mentioned appear to have increased but within work, issues like long hours culture, people dealing with emails and phone calls when they are not at work and the 24/7 nature of consumerism and economic demands have all played a part. On another tack, we have seen changes in the way that people talk more openly now about have difficult times – so more discussion and disclosure of previously 'hidden' experiences has led, in a very positive way, to a greater awareness.

2. How can we ensure organisations get mental health on the agenda at board level, and how do employees persuade their colleagues that this is an essential part of maximising business performance?

It is increasingly becoming recognised that mental health is a boardroom issue. UK Research shows that FTSE 100 companies that prioritise employee engagement and wellbeing outperform the rest of the FTSE 100 by an average of 10 percentage points. If employees feel they are supported, if they feel their work is meaningful and valued, then they tend to have higher wellbeing levels, which in turn makes them more engaged and more productive. Healthy employees make for healthy workplaces, and this can be seen in terms of employee satisfaction, retention rates, productivity and motivation, and the bottom line of the organisation.

Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

One of the most powerful gestures at a Board level can be for a senior manager to speak out about their experience of mental ill health, which normalises the experience, and 'gives permission' to others to share their experiences more openly. This type of cultural change is what is needed to end mental health stigma in the workplace.

3. Is the taboo lifting on mental illness, specifically in the workplace?

There is still much stigma around mental ill health, both within and outside of the workplace. However, in the UK, there has certainly been progress in terms of tackling mental health stigma in the workplace through mainstreaming mental health training and a variety of media campaigns. Some mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression are perhaps more normalised now, and there is more general awareness around them. However there is still work to be done to ensure that we all see mental health on a continuum. All of us, at some point in our lives, experience difficult life events such as bereavement, divorce or redundancy, and the way we cope with them will vary from person to person, depending on personality, resilience and support networks. Some of us will have sought professional help, others will have received support from colleagues, friends or family. A vital message to put out there is that mental health concerns everyone, and that we are all at some points in our lives more vulnerable and in need of additional support.

4. How can the people in this room support and develop mental health literacy in the workplace?

Establishing and mainstreaming mental health awareness training is key, as many people are frightened of saying or doing the wrong thing if a colleague discloses mental ill health. In fact, in this situation, the guidelines are very simple: listen actively, acknowledge the person's distress without brushing it off, be clear about the support and level of confidentiality you and the organisation can provide, and think collaboratively and flexibly about how best to support the person within the workplace. Being honest that you do not necessarily have all the answers to hand but will find out more how best to support the person is also a useful strategy. The key is not to be a counsellor or doctor or confidante: it is about being a good manager.

Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

5. What kind of support can we give to the managers who support staff experiencing a mental illness?

Supporting managers and other professionals (e.g. HR managers) is vital. All managers need training in whether or not to ask about mental health during the recruitment process, how to handle disclosure, how to support employees' well-being, and how to spot early signs of mental ill health. This last point is crucial as early intervention typically has much higher recovery rates than later interventions. Early signs of mental ill health can vary enormously from person to person, and can include physical, psychological and behavioural changes. Physical changes could include changes in sleep patterns, appetite or weight changes or physical pain such as back pain. Psychological changes could include anxiety or distress, mood changes or indecision. Behavioural changes might be increased smoking or drinking, persistent lateness and working longer hours than normal. Workplace triggers for mental ill health can include working long hours with no break, high pressure environments or unrealistic deadlines: a key part of prevention therefore is to support managers create healthy workplaces for their employees.

6. Obviously, not every attempt by an employer to help an employee with a mental illness will be successful – in what circumstances might this intervention not be successful?

Being in work is generally good for our health but there will be times when someone's level of sickness absence makes the situation unsustainable – for both employer and employee. Sometimes, while very difficult at the time, making the decision to bring the job to an end may, in the longer term, be the best thing.

For further information:

www.mindfulemployer.net

www.mhe-sme.org

www.mind.org.uk

Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



To pursue a carrier with disabilities obviously requires an accommodation of the workplace all the more so as mental health related problems appear to have increased in the working environment of the 21st century.

In order to achieve this goal, European countries afford legal protection to disabled persons and enact incentives for companies which employ disabled persons.

Thanks to our practice at Flichy Grangé Avocats and the input obtained from various countries from our global network L&E Global, we are able to provide you with the following overview of European legal rules and the recent new developments across Europe.

European legislations regarding disabilities at work

Legal protection

Some countries (such as Sweden) have only limited prohibition against discrimination in employment, it being limited to the public sector.

Other countries have far more robust prohibitions against disability discrimination in employment, requiring employers to make **reasonable accommodation** for disabled employees (e.g., Denmark, Finland, Israel, Norway, the UK, among others).

For instance, in France, the French Labor Code provides that, to guarantee equal treatment with regard to people with disabilities, the employer must *“take the appropriate measures (...) to allow the disabled workers to be employed or keep their employment”*. Objecting to implementing those accommodation measures may be deemed discrimination.

Some countries impose **employment quotas** (e.g. France, Israel, Russia, Spain, Turkey, Italy). Their basic target is to stimulate labor demand by committing

Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

employers to employ a certain share of employees with disabilities. Typically, the stipulated share ranges between 2% (Spain) to 7% (Italy – the highest % in Europe; France is 6%). Generally, quotas are only valid above a certain manpower threshold, which ranges between 15 employees (Italy) and 50 employees (Spain, Lithuania, Greece). Alternatively, in some of the existing systems, it is possible to conclude sub-contracts with organizations which employ a significant share of employees with disabilities (e.g Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, France, Slovakia).

Incentives

A number of countries provide for tax or reimbursement incentives for hiring disabled individuals (e.g. Finland, France, Greece, Norway, Russia).

For instance, in France, expenditure incurred to allow disabled workers to be employed, may under certain conditions, be deducted from the contribution that companies have to pay to the dedicated fund called AGEFIPH.

The latest new changes in legislations and case-law

- **New laws**

In Poland

Further to a new legislation, disabled persons may work 35-hour a week (instead of a 40-hour workweek) unless a doctor's certificate states they do not require such a reduction.

As from July 2016, deduction relief for the National Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled will be decreased from 80% to 50% for employers who order services from employers which employ disabled persons. As from January 2016, the minimum wage has been increased by EUR 25. However, the subsidies for employers which employ a disabled person remain unchanged (severe disability – EUR 415, moderate disability – EUR 260, low disability – EUR 100). As a result, the total labor costs for a company that employs disabled people has increased.

In France

An Ordinance dated 10 December 2015, that has come into force on the 1st January

Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

2016, allows the employers to use a preliminary ruling procedure ("*rescrit*") to ensure compliance of their situation with respect to the quota legislation, and notably:

- the determination of the number of employees to be taken into account to calculate the applicable threshold;
- the implementation of the employment quota legislation;
- the payment obligations pursuant to the employment quota legislation;
- the identification of disabled workers as defined by French legislation

Employers will be able to ask the AGEFIPH to adopt an explicit position regarding the compliance of their own situation with that legislation; no penalty may be imposed on the employer on the basis of a different position.

In Germany

A reform of the Equal Treatment Act of Disabled Persons has been established in May 2016 and shall strengthen the rights of persons with disabilities. This reform aims especially at:

- Improving the accessibility for disabled persons;
- Allowing an easier language to strengthen the participation of persons with mental disabilities; and
- Strengthening the rights of disabled women.

- **Case law**

In the UK

The *Risby v London Borough of Waltham Forest* case UKEAT/0318/15 confirmed that there only needs to be a loose causal link between an employee's conduct and their disability, to win a claim for discrimination arising from a disability. In this case, the claimant was dismissed when he became angry and used inappropriate language in the workplace. However, his anger only appeared to have arisen because he was wheelchair-bound and had been unable to access a workplace being run by his employer due to its location and, depending on the facts, this could amount to discrimination arising from disability.

The employer's knowledge of disability is an important component: in the *CLFIS (UK) Ltd v Reynolds* case [2015] IRLR 562 confirmed that when determining whether direct discrimination had occurred, the tribunal must focus on the thought processes, motivation and knowledge of the decision-maker. Just because the employer's

Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

occupational health department had knew about the employee's disability did not mean that the dismissing manager knew about the disability, so there was no direct disability discrimination.

In Germany

Pursuant to the German Social Code, the employer is compelled to perform an in-company integration management in each case that an employee is sick for more than six weeks overall, either continuously or in several sick leave periods during one year. However, according to a recent ruling of the German Federal Employment Court in April 2016, the employer is not obligated to perform an in-company integration management during the first six months of employment. This applies even if the employee is severely disabled and the employer terminates the employment during the probation period.

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Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



About facilities and learning infrastructure for disabled students in place in Montpellier Business School

MBS closely follows indicators connected to the students in situation of handicap since almost 6 years now. It is moreover one of the subjects that we determined as a priority within the framework of our Label Diversity.

In order to be able to welcome all disabled students whatever is the precise handicap situation, MBS adapts deeply its infrastructure in the past 6 years. The investment concerning campus accessibility represents more than 500 000 Euros during this period.

From the point of view of the internal organization, MBS put in place a network of administrative staff to welcome and accompany its disabled students throughout the different steps of the courses. 8 administrative staff have been trained to become handicap referents.

Our disabled students can now find a specialized support in the internship service, in the different programs' administration services, in the examination center, in the apprenticeship service, in the diversity and CSR direction, and in the international student support service.

The aim of this organization is to be able to treat quickly any problem and to adapt each step of the course for disabled students (going abroad, finding an internship, finding an apprenticeship, adapting the presence during the sessions, adapting the examinations conditions).

We also propose each year two recruitment sessions for disabled students, and we receive systematically for these occasions more than 10 companies coming into the campus to meet the students to propose them apprenticeships, internships or jobs. Moreover, every year, a group of students organizes a special "Handivalides day" in

Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

order to raise the awareness towards disability. The program starts generally with a conference about a subject linked with disability matters and after a "blind lunch", the students can try to experiment, through some workshops, different situations that are every-day life for disabled students.

But the strongest awareness for our students is to realize that disabled students are integrated in our promotions, are studying with them and that they can do as well as students without disability.

We still do have to improve as you just have 33 disabled students followed last year, which is quite a low rate regarding our promotions, but begin to be similar to the higher education rates in France (only 4% of the disabled students in France have access to higher education).

Why our disabled students are so important ?

Generally, Business School's students find quite easily a job after being graduated because they did a lot of internships or they've been apprentice for 1 or 2 years. But our graduated disabled students who enter the labour market have got something more. I would say that these students are strong-minded (it's difficult to conciliate handicap and high education), they have a very developed team spirit (they know the importance of cooperation) and they have a strong adaptability. They often make efforts not to be a burden, to erase the differences and other people learn a lot from disabled people.

Still, disabled students graduated from high educational institutions are not numerous because it's difficult for them to overcome all the steps, it's still very hard to conciliate disability and studies.

How can companies meet disabled students?

Through a specific network with associations deeply committed with handicap like FEDEEH (<http://fedeeh.org/>) or TREMPLIN (<http://www.tremplin-handicap.fr/>). Companies can join these associations which organize several times a year recruitment sessions with disabled students.

Companies can also send internship or apprenticeship offers to our dedicated staff: stages@montpellier-bs.com for the internship department and apprentis-sage@montpellier-bs.com for the apprenticeship department. Each offer is sent to all our students including the disabled students and they will be able to apply.

Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

Companies can also find specialized digital platforms where they can be in touch with disabled students: they can propose job offers or internship offers mentioning that they do not have any problem to welcome disabled people, whatever it is.

For any further information, please feel free to reach out to:
Sophie Gosselin

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Disability Matters - 2016 Welcome Reception

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



WELCOME



2016

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Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



This award category represents marketing, advertising, public/community relations and related initiatives that both target and support consumers who either have a disability or are caring for a child or other dependent with special needs.

Disability Matters - 2016 Honorees

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



BNP Paribas Fortis, a bank accessible to everyone

Springboard Consulting has conferred on BNP Paribas Fortis the 2016 'Disability Matters Europe' award for our 'A bank for customers with special needs as well' programme. BNP Paribas Fortis is the first Belgian company to receive the award and is greatly honoured to obtain this recognition.

BNP Paribas Fortis is the largest bank in Belgium, serving more than 3.6 million customers – private individuals, families, young people, the self-employed, professionals and entrepreneurs. The Bank also offers a full range of products, services and expert advice to large and medium-sized companies and government organisations. As 'the bank for a changing world', BNP Paribas Fortis is determined to help drive innovation, assisting clients to identify opportunities arising from change, to fulfil their plans and achieve their ambitions.

Accessible to all

BNP Paribas Fortis intends to be the bank for everyone, which means that we must also be fully accessible to customers with special needs. Those customers should be able – as far as possible – to carry out their banking transactions independently and in a user-friendly manner.

For the convenience of customers with reduced mobility, 195 of our branches – one in four – can now be accessed via an inclined plane and are also provided with a lower reception counter, automatic or semi-automatic doors, sufficient space, convenient parking spots, and so on.

For customers with impaired fine motor skills, BNP Paribas Fortis offers special card-readers with extra-large buttons and screens for our web and mobile banking applications, which can be ordered free of charge and will be delivered within the week. We have also made special efforts to ensure that our banking applications are

Disability Matters - 2016 Honorees

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

fully accessible to visually impaired customers, who can use the special card-reader with text-to-speech function with their screen reader.

In addition, all BNP Paribas Fortis ATMs, some 2,000 in total, are equipped with voice guidance systems designed for blind or visually impaired customers, which require the use of a headset.

Moreover, the Bank will on request send out account statements in Braille. Last but not least, hard-of-hearing customers wishing to have a meeting with their branch advisor can log in via the Bank's free Wi-Fi network to an app which provides remote sign-language interpreting.

Sharing experiences

The 'Disability Matters Europe' award has now prompted BNP Paribas Fortis to gather in one document all the knowledge and experience acquired in our efforts to improve access for people with physical disabilities and to share it with all companies looking to provide similar care for those living with a disability. The document can be downloaded on our corporate website.

<https://www.bnpparibasfortis.com/our-responsibility/civic/Article/encouraging-diversity>.

In addition to sharing our experience, BNP Paribas Fortis sees it as equally important that everyone who reads this document should provide their own feedback and make suggestions. Having received an award for our efforts to improve accessibility, BNP Paribas Fortis will certainly not be resting on its laurels. On the contrary, this is an incentive to the Bank and our employees to focus even more attentively on the needs of all our customers, including those with special needs.

Clair Godding
Head of Diversity & Inclusion
Pascal De Groote
Customer Experience Manager

Contact: customer.satisfaction@bnpparibasfortis.com

Disability Matters - 2016 Honorees

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



At the Orange Foundation we work so that everyone can live better and live better together. We know that new technologies have a part to play, so we are making new technologies our priority. We believe in technology as a tool and opportunity to improve people's life. For the last 10 years we have been committed to the cause of autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Digital tools have been appearing over the last few years and different researches have proved that these intuitive tools have clear benefits for people suffering of this disorder. Therefore, we developed technological projects to improve basically three main aspects of people with autism: communication, autonomy and social skills.

These applications, that are freely downloadable from the Internet, are carried out in collaboration with universities, experts and users from registered associations

Some examples of these applications are:

- [Pictogram Room - Fundación Orange](#). Educational video games addressed to make the understanding of aspects like self-recognition, the parts of the body and joint attention easier. When playing with Kinect a high degree of interactivity is given: the user sees a pictogram superposed on their body and it is the pictogram image which carries out the actions.
- [Azahar - Fundación Orange](#). A set of 10 communication applications, leisure activities and a schedule for PC, laptop and tablets that allow an improvement in abilities and the planning and enjoyment of leisure activities.
- [e-Mintza - Fundación Orange](#). A customizable system to make communication easier. It shows a board with pictograms or images and sounds that are adaptable to the necessities of each person, it can also be used with personal photos, videos etcetera...

Disability Matters - 2016 Honorees

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

These applications have been downloaded more than 375.000 occasions in 80 countries

In addition to its technological work, the Foundation promotes novel leisure activities for people with autism. Thanks to the efforts and generosity of Orange employees we have played basketball with classes adapted to children and autism and we have done workshops to improve creativity working in disciplines such as painting, photographs or graffiti.

As a corollary to this task in favour of people with autism, the Foundation has also developed a system of diffusion to make autism better known in society. We have made and produced movies, comics and documentaries such as "Maria and I" a finalist in the Goya and Gaudí awards.

For more information contact:

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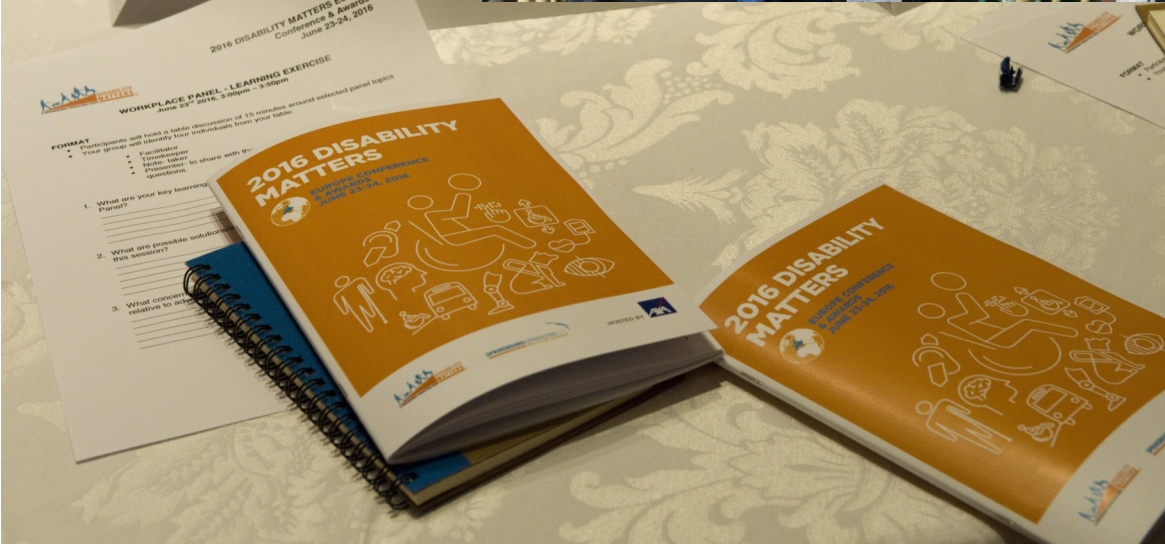
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Disability Matters - 2016 Welcome Reception

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



Disability Matters - Europe Conference & Awards Honorees

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



This award category represents Diversity, Work-Life and related initiatives that support employees who have a disability (as described above) as well as those individuals caring for a child or other dependent with special needs.

Disability Matters - 2016 Honorees

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



redefining / standards

I was delighted to accept the Disability Matters Award on behalf of AXA Insurance Ireland on the 22nd June 2016. I am a strong advocate of Diversity & Inclusion in the Workplace and being only new to the Company, I felt proud that the organisation I had chosen to join had achieved this Award.

The Award is in recognition of Job Shadow Day, an initiative that we have been involved in for the last three years. Seen as a start to our journey and a position step to recognising the valuable contribution that people with disabilities can make and do in the workplace.

It's evident to me that AXA is committed to promoting diversity and equal opportunities by creating a working environment where you are treated with dignity and respect. Diversity for us is recognising, understanding and valuing the differences that exist in our society.

Job Shadow Day

Job Shadow Day is a nationwide initiative introduced by the Irish Association of Supported Employment (IASE) whose aim is to bring people with disabilities and local employers like AXA together to promote equal employment opportunities and highlight the valuable contribution that people with disabilities can make and do in the workplace.

The initiative gives people with disabilities the opportunity to shadow an employee for the day in their job, giving them an awareness of what it is like to be in a working environment.

We held the 2016 Job Shadow Day in May where the participants 'shadowed' a number of our AXA employee volunteers, and learned more about the skills and training needed to succeed at work (from listening in on customer calls, understanding our

Disability Matters - 2016 Honorees

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

claims process to IT coding and bug reporting).

Participant Fred White - *"I would like to thank you very much for the Job Shadowing day---- last Wednesday. I enjoyed the experience very much. It was very helpful and informative. Everyone I met was so kind and friendly and the atmosphere was great".*

This positive feedback is two way, the engagement of our employees in the initiative raises disability awareness across the workplace, and we've received great support from the volunteers.

*"I got great satisfaction out of "giving" something back, this was important to me",
"It made me question my daily tasks and not just what I do but how I do it"
"I learned that these people have a story, are skilled and have a valuable contribution to make to the work place that we might be missing out on"*

Ultimately there was a real proud feeling amongst the group to be part of such a positive initiative.

There were a number of learnings for us such as; tailoring the participants skills set to the job shadow assigned; promoting conversations between the parties to gain more understanding of the disability experienced, and will be incorporated into the day for next year.

I feel that initiatives like this help promote the company's values and ethos, building our employer brand locally and globally, and I'm looking forward to participating in Job Shadow day next year as this will form an integral part of our D&I strategy for 2016 and beyond.

Carmel O'Brien
HR Director (Ireland)

Disability Matters - 2016 Welcome Reception

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



Disability Matters - Europe

Disability Champion Award Honorees

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



**Disability Champion Award
(Executive):**
David Oldfield
Group Director for Retails



**Disability Champion Award
(Management):**
Mayte Cubino Gonzalez
Technical Services Manager

This award category recognizes an individual whose advocacy, commitment, and action in support of mainstreaming disability in their workforce, workplace and/or marketplace has greatly contributed to their organizations success in these endeavors. The award recipient is someone whose job description does not specifically include this work yet he/she diligently works to influence others.

Disability Champion Management - 2016

Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016



When we least expect it, life sets us a challenge to test our courage and willingness to change; at such a moment, there is no point in pretending that nothing has happened or in saying that we are not yet ready.

20 months ago, I went through one of those moments, when a heartbreaking diagnosis changed the life of someone very close to me, and mine with hers. Looking back in time, I see that moment as the start of a journey where I initially endeavored to understand that condition in particular, and ended up becoming an avid reader and true advocate of raising awareness around hidden disabilities. As I was navigating through this information, I found myself removing numerous fears and stigmas along the way, and facing some eye-opening statistics that did put things into perspective.

With my engineering background, I have to admit that this made me realize that a lot more people were going through the same. And this was the turning point in my life where I found strength during my maternity leave to create my blog about Hidden Disabilities, where I aim to help others with my own experience and all the information I collect and consolidate about hidden disabilities or hidden abilities as I like to refer to them.

Hidden disabilities are disabilities that are not immediately apparent or obvious. Having a disability may not affect your job performance, but it can affect daily living, aspects of your work and personal relationships. Depending on the disability, people may need job accommodations to perform the essential functions of their job.

It is estimated that 20% of people in the U.S. (64 million people) have a medical condition which could be considered a type of hidden disability. In the UK, Government statistics cite figures indicating 1 in 6 (16% or 11 million) of the current overall UK population are disabled. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Ageing and Careers reported that 4 million people in Australia or 18.5 per cent of the population have one or more disabilities. These numbers keep increasing year over year as better methods to diagnose become available.

These numbers speak by themselves, and truly opened my mind to realize that we all

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Paris, France, June 23-24, 2016

work with and interact on a daily basis with people affected by hidden disabilities. Reasonable accommodations can be provided for all people with disabilities and make a big impact on their work experience and performance. The challenge in today's workplace is that if a disability is not observable, many people have difficulty understanding the need for adjustments or identifying concrete actions to be taken. And this is what encouraged me to create an awareness campaign, to precisely help overcome that challenge, by sharing information on the disabilities themselves and removing some stigmas and myths, how do they affect the individual and small tips on reasonable accommodations that can be provided to improve work conditions and relations.

Every month I publish the information about one hidden disability, and I open at the same time a forum to allow people to share their very own experiences. The most rewarding part of this work is by all means reading the testimonials that are shared every time in every forum. Amazing stories in first person from people that are true examples of how successful you can be despite being affected by hidden disabilities, truly inspiring stories of parents that have helped their children to overcome their challenges, or people that are embracing the message and applying the recommendations on their daily job with their colleagues and reports. I cannot thank enough all these people for being so generous to share their experiences and make this campaign as relevant and as human as it can be.

It is vital for me every time to highlight all the positive aspects that these hidden disabilities bring to the individuals as well, calling out the strengths associated to some of the conditions, because as I mentioned, these are hidden abilities and super powers that deserve to be known, specially when it comes to ensuring that we allow them to be at their best and play on their strengths in the workplace. It is all about making it more inclusive and collaborative!

Color-blindness, dyslexia, autism, hearing impairment, dyscalculia, epilepsy, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), Dyspraxia, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), Multiple Sclerosis are just some examples of the hidden disabilities I have covered to date... but there are 20 more in the pipeline that I am so much looking forward to cover.

Today my blog is shared with an audience of 4000+ employees at Cisco, but the upcoming weeks will mark a new milestone in this incredible journey that started 20 months ago, as I am currently working on making it publicly available and share the good news and links over LinkedIn.

I am very fortunate to work for a company like Cisco where you get so much support

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at all levels from colleagues, managers and executives to invest time and devote efforts in your passion beyond your daily job. The top of the cake has been, without a moment of doubt, being recognized as a 2016 European Disability Champion by Disability Matters, and I can't thank enough Nadine Vogel and the Springboard Consulting group for such an honor and privilege. Thank You, Nadine and team, for the amazing job you do, Disability (truly) Matters!

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