

Trudy: Hello, and welcome to the Next Sense Institute podcast. My name is Trudy Smith and I am the manager of continuing professional education at the Next Sense Institute. This is the first podcast since we relaunched under the new brand in March, and look forward to continuing to provide conversations about hearing and vision education and health, new resources, emerging ideas and hot button issues. Our first discussion on the Next Sense Institute podcast is with Elise Lonsdale. Can you please introduce yourself to the audience Elise

Elise: Hi everybody and thanks Trudy for having me on the programme. I am vision impaired. I've got 10% vision, I've got congenital glaucoma, I've been born into a family with that disease. I started working years ago in factories and things, but I did a career change and wanted to go into the more academic computing side of life in the '90s. Since then, I've worked in help desks, I've also worked as a Cisco instructor. I've also worked in the disability and not-for-profit sector, been a former web developer. But I really have a bent towards education and training, and I now run my own business doing that sort of work after working for three of the major blindness organizations in Australasia.

That being VisAbility in Western Australia, which used to be the Association for the Blind, where I was an alternative format producer. Then I went to doing access technology support at the Blind Foundation in New Zealand, now called Blind Low Vision NZ, and I ended up at Vision Australia for one year fixed term contract, and now I am doing my own business, doing the work I love doing.

Trudy: And that's so important I think, that I really want to talk to you about your company Disability and Assistive Technology Access Australasia. Tell us about the company.

Elise: Well, it's a small business. It was never designed to be a one person operation so I'm looking at, or I am actually employing people to assist with the things I don't want to do, or the things I can't do very well is also another option. That's one of the first laws I learnt in business, when I did a business course two decades ago, where if you can't do something or don't want to do something, just simply employ somebody.

So I've employed somebody to assist with the report writing and some of the assessments we do, all of the assessments really, that we do for our clients. But most of the work I do is delivering the actual training itself. Going out to see people, say for example, I've taken on some people in the last few weeks that actually want to do learning how to use the Mac after being JAWS and Windows users for a long time.

So they've come into the Mac environment because of the success of iPhones. The IOS operating system is so functional and accessible with voiceover, and does have a lot in it also for hearing impaired people, that it's not surprising that some of those people are following through because the iPhone integrates so well with the Mac,

to want to learn how to use voiceover on the Mac. I also still support Windows and JAWS, and also my job at Statewide Vision Resource Center on a Friday with the support skills programme here in Victoria, that similar sort of work goes on there as well. Other than that I'm just working with children rather than adults, or young adults as we call them these days, children, young adults, working with that demographic. Whereas in my main business it's working with adults, middle aged people, senior people, mainly middle-aged people at the moment. So, that's a little bit about what we're doing. So it's Access Technology Support.

Trudy: Are you predominantly working with people who are blind and have low vision?

Elise: Predominantly yes. I've worked with deaf blind people. I had a lovely lady when I was working in New Zealand, absolutely gorgeous lady. She was a JAWS user, she was deaf blind. She was in her 80s at the time and had been using the computer for, oh a good many, many years and had been totally blind for about 10 years, but had failing eyesight. And she had, I think it was Usher's syndrome. So you're getting both the blindness and the deafness there. And of course, by the time I met this lady she was totally blind, but had had some JAW skills, so we were able to pick up on that.

There's been a number of people here in Victoria and around Australia that I've worked with who are deaf blind, and some have got cognitive issues, some have got, there's mental illness that sometimes strike, other issues as well. But they've always got the blindness and that's where we focus on, it's just that there's people out there these days that aren't just vision impaired or blind. They've got other challenges as well.

Trudy: Certainly. Access is clearly something that's really important to you Elise, and I wonder is that something that you learned as a younger person, that you really wanting to now make life more accessible for people? Or how did you get into this kind of work?

Elise: Yes, I do. Because I've seen so many people have difficulties with access, access to documents, even just reading. Some people will say, "I'll just send you a PDF." Well, anyone in the know, will know, that's a real hit and miss affair because some people just send you a picture that's a scanned image, which has no text in it, therefore the screen reader can't lock onto anything unless it OCRs it, Optical Character Recognition. Now JAWS can do that, it's a nuisance but not all screen readers will, or you could print it and rescan it, or you could stick it through a myriad of different programs on your iPhone that'll OCR the texts, but, it's not as accurate. Or else you can get PDF files that are really well marked up with proper headings, bullet lists, those sort of elements that blindies like to use with their screen reader to navigate or jump through certain parts of a document, or you can get anywhere in between.

So it is the access, not just access to documents, but also access to technology. People, for example, click on a button, a green button that says 'let's go' on a website or click on an icon, could be a challenge. We're using the screen reader, if

the site or the application software you're using is accessible, can make the world of difference for people. And I got into it because I was interested in it, I saw what the problems I could have, I saw the problems other people could have, and I just know my way around the system and I want to fix it. But not only do I want to fix these things, I want to show other people how to fix them, educate them.

Trudy: And I think that's so important. I guess I'm curious about, because access really facilitates people's engagement in real life activities, like their day-to-day activities, but also professionally. And so I wonder if you can speak to some of the work that you're doing and how is that helping people in their lives.

Elise: Certainly it can do. I've just got to think of one of the many myriad things that I've had to come across over the years. But a good example is people want to be able to gain employment. Or people want to be able to set themselves up so they can study. One young lady came to me recently with a whole bunch of things in a Facebook messenger message. I want to be able to do music, I want to be able to use my new Mac like I once did the PC. Now that means doing mail for her. It means doing email, writing documents, texting. It means learning a music program. Whilst I may not have the skills to teach that particular music program, I know people who will be able to, they want to get back into a bit of audio production work.

Other people have had, there's another lady I've got on my case load at the moment, who needs to be able to access her iPhone and other iOS devices so she can simply communicate with the school for her children. Down here in Victoria a lot of schools use a program called Compass, which is, I'm not sure, I think it's been rolled out in various other states as well, but it started in Victoria. Where the state schools here will have, it's like a content management system really, where kids have their assignments on it. The results are given to the parents through it, contact to the teachers is done on this platform and it is reasonably accessible. So this lady wanted me to assist, she only had her iPhone at the time, now she has an iPad, to be able to access that.

Other correspondence from the school might come in the form of text messages. If their kids are marked absent for the day, when they shouldn't be marked absent for the day, let's say, letters, correspondence, communicating with family.

Also, when I showed her the keyboard, now this particular lady, I can't give any names, was a very successful, before she lost her sight, quite a successful events' manager coordinator for resorts, that sort of stuff. Looking after people. Before she had her children, lived overseas, looking after English tourists in Greece and that sort of stuff. So quite a successful and appropriately skilled woman. With the loss of her eyesight in more recent years, those skills have gone. But when I assessed her on a keyboard, for her iPad that she was thinking about getting, and has now subsequently got, it was very, very easy to show her that, Hey, you could get that touch typing skill back very quickly.

She's since now done that, and she's now got her iPad and she's part of her program with me, we'll be doing some keyboarding and being able to access the iPad. And if she connects the keyboard to her iPhone, and even down the track, if she ever got a computer, she would be able to use the keyboard on that too. So it's giving people sometimes back the skills that they've somehow missed out on. If they've suffered a loss of eyesight, particularly eyesight in later life.

Trudy: What you're really doing is setting them up to reengage with their lives.

Elise: That's correct, yes. And that can often hit hard when, I saw it a lot in New Zealand too. When you get the seniors who have had six, seven - five, six, seven, even eight decades of full sight, and with say macular degeneration, that you would probably be aware of in your business, being the major cause of blindness through the Asia Pacific region, they're rendered blind or at least with reduced vision. Not totally blind, but enough to really, really, really make them make changes to their life. And because people in that older generation, they don't have the same affinity, in many cases, with technology as do younger people. Or they're also grieving for the loss of their sight as well. And I could imagine that would be happening in the hearing area as well. Where people are losing a sense, and all of a sudden they've got to find their feet again. And they've got to be able to learn to adjust with that impaired vision or impaired hearing.

Trudy: Absolutely.

Elise: And grieving for it too.

Trudy: Yeah, most definitely. At least we often hear about the underemployment of people with disability, particularly sensory disability. And I wonder if you have any comments about that?

Elise: Oh, don't get me started.

Trudy: I'm inviting you to get started.

Elise: Thanks Trudy. We had a chat about this, I think over email last week, and prior to coming on here now. Well, I do, I think when you look at the figures for the disability or for the blindness community. You're upwards of 66, 68, 70% of that community being unemployed. And those figures are staggering and they're absolutely staggering. And you think [crosstalk 00:12:34].

Trudy: Staggering, horrifying.

Elise: Yep.

Trudy: Disappointing?

Elise: Disappointing. Especially when there's a lot of talent out there, you hear about the successful people in the blind community who've got jobs or run businesses or doing podcasts, or, some of them have got law degrees, others they're high up in government or we've even had a disability commissioner who's been vision-impaired or totally blind several years ago. So you hear about those people, but for every one of those, there's probably a good six other people who are just as intelligent, maybe not as well educated, and that's another story, about the lack of it, the quality of education that's been in the system over the years, aimed at, prior to the current generation let's say, or even the current two generations, the opportunities haven't been there for them so they haven't been able to succeed. They've had a lack of braille tuition, that sort of stuff that profoundly affects literacy.

But back to the employment thing, there's probably about five or six to every one of those successful people you hear about, there's multiple others out there who would probably, just as intelligent, could be just as competent, and could be just as able if they are in different circumstances and yet they're unemployed. And it's those intelligent minds that are unemployed. They can be quite a dangerous thing because, it starts to lead to self worse, a feeling of no self-worth, can lead to depression. Because you've got this otherwise thinking perfectly operational brain sitting there doing nothing all day. [crosstalk 00:14:15]

Trudy: [crosstalk 00:14:15] [inaudible 00:14:17] isn't it.

Elise: I think it's a travesty, I really do. I don't think some of the organizations have really scored well in that employment sector, sadly, of getting gainful employment for people.

Or there seems to be now, when I was young, a stereotype of either weaving cane baskets in a workshop or being a switchboard operator. My mum was a switchboard operator and a very good one at that. But our telephonist, as we might call them now, but these days there are fewer switchboards, and as a result, it's now, oh you're blind you can have a call center job.

Well, I couldn't imagine anything, I did do some of that work for a little while, for HP in the nineties, it drove me mad. So I couldn't imagine myself doing it. But I love engaging with people. I've got the qualities that mean I like engaging with people, I love training people, I love working with people. Especially people who come to me with a plan that want to, like the lady I said about before, who wanted to do her music and use her Mac like she wants to do PC, she's got a goal. She's got something she wants to achieve rather than people ringing up a help desk going, "I've got this problem and this doesn't work and that doesn't work and it's all your fault." No, I'm not good at that.

Trudy: No I can imagine.

I don't think many people would find that satisfying or fulfilling.

Elise: Sorry.

Trudy: I don't think many people would find that satisfying or fulfilling.

Elise: No. I just got bamboozled by people from, I won't mention the company's name or wine people, people I can buy wine off. And they're always pestering me. I bought oodles of that stuff a month ago and they've been on the phone at least twice, if not three times every week since that time, and I've bought stuff off them numerous times.

Now I'm getting, "You're such a great customer, at least we can do it at cost price." I'm thinking, if you can do your wine at cost price, why don't you ring up and sell it to somebody who's prepared to pay more. Leave me alone, I've got plenty of it. To have a job like that would drive me absolutely nuts.

Trudy: Absolutely, and most people I think.

Elise: So the stereotypical job there for me isn't true. So, as I said to you before I came on air, yes you can train and you can study and you'll get lucky at getting a job. Even you can go through university and avail yourself of the far better education and prospects that are available to young people coming through now, or even middle aged people who might want a career change. Far better learning opportunities now than what you would in my generation. But you still might not score a job. So if you don't score a job, make your own.

Trudy: I like that philosophy, that would be daunting for people though.

Elise: Yes, it is. There's this young man in Queensland I've been talking to not so long ago. He's trying to work out how to get started in business. But because he hasn't got the years of adult history behind him, he's only in his early twenties, so to start a business there would be him meeting with different challenges than what I've got. And it is daunting, it's scary, I've done it before. When my fixed term contract finished with Vision Australia, really just two years ago this month, and it was always knowing that if I leave this place I'll probably go and do something crazy, like start another business. So I did. So I did. If they didn't want to put me on for another 12 months, I thought, well I'm not going to stop doing the things I like doing because of that.

Why don't I just start, I've come back from New Zealand. I hoped to have had longer with these guys, but that wasn't to be the case. So I thought, well, I know what I'm doing when it comes to the actual physically doing the work. I've built relationships over the years, even prior to my tenure with Vision Australia, with Quantum Technologies and Pacific Vision, and a whole bunch of these people selling technology. I know a lot of people in the area, and as hard as it's going to be, that's what I'm going to do. So I turned down their offer of coming back on to the

employment program and saying, "Hey guys, I'm going off to do my own show." And that was two years ago. And it's been a really cool ride, it was slow at first, but it didn't take long to get, I think I was out two days after I left, with a client. I put together a website because I've got that experience, so I didn't have to pay someone to do that.

I started drawing in people, a very good dear friend of mine, Kelly Mitchell, who has been a very good business coach. So I drew on her experience, I'm not sure that I've mentioned since we've gone live, yes I have, I've brought in somebody who can assist me with the report writing and those sorts of things, that I've now been working with negotiating with people driving me around. But in the meantime I'm now busy every day of the week, to the point where, a couple of weeks ago, I had one client cancel, the next client canceled and so it went down the queue. Eventually I got the third person to fill the slot. So we're getting people queuing up wanting appointments, and I'm always a believer in if people can have their appointment on a particular day, so-and-so gets her appointment Tuesday morning and so on, someone might get it Wednesday afternoon. These people I've just come home from, have them on a Thursday morning, it gives us that regularity. So, I mean to say, it's been a long, it's been hard work, but it's also been very rewarding.

Trudy: Absolutely. At least you are the living embodiment of two phrases that have really stuck out for me today around our chat. If you don't want to do it, outsource it.

Elise: Yep.

Trudy: Can't find a job, make your own.

Elise: That's the one [crosstalk 00:20:05]

Trudy: That's such great advice, but for young people thinking about their futures as well.

Elise: Well, it is, and just recently, I've seen the need to do more formal service agreements with clients. I've seen the need to really ramp up the quality of the notes when we do a training session with people, to put out the notes. I've seen a need to, I also run a business network part, started a business network called Blindness and Beyond, where there's a number of us independent people offering this sort of support, not just technology, but pretty much the four disciplines. What I call the four disciplines, it's access technology, O and M which is mobility and orientation, occupational therapy or OT, and orthotics. So we now have in our network, a number of people from all those fields. And of course, the way I've been referred to you people, is through, if it's all right to mention Bronwyn.

Trudy: Oh, absolutely.

Elise: Absolutely, because Bronwyn's known to the audience here. I've met Bronwyn, in actual fact, I met Bronwyn through my statewide contacts. And when I found out

that she was an independent O and M, doing the things that she loves to do, I got her into our business network and I've since made a number of referrals to her from people I know. And she in turn, and a number of other people like Jessica Timmins, has made referrals back to me. So what comes around goes around. So in the middle of doing all that bureaucratic stuff for my own business, but I've also found myself in a situation, where we're in the similar situation, of formalizing Blindness and Beyond, to make it a legal entity with its own board of directors and its own constitution. And I've got a heap of paperwork here.

Mark in Brisbane has been quite good at getting, sourcing this information because he's set up his own company. So we're using the resources that he used, his own legal people, to help us set this up. So there's a lot of hard work going on behind the scenes to make this all happen for people

Trudy: You're such a hunter force for good and growth Elise, it's been such a delight to talk to you. We're going to make your website link available in the show notes, so people can find you because I'm pretty sure people are going to be hearing you and go " We want to learn more about Elise and how he can work with you." Really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today. Thank you so much.

Elise: Thank you Trudy. It's been a pleasure.