

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 281

Transcript – Jane Britt knows a lot about accessibility and inclusion in the boardroom



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Jane Britt about accessibility and inclusion in the boardroom.

Helga Svendsen 0:07

Before we start the podcast today, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record. For me, I'm on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present. I acknowledge first nations people's continuing connection to land, waters, skies, culture and country. I support voice, treaty and truth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Helga Svendsen 0:38

Now let me tell you about Jane. Jane is on the boards of Holy Cross Services and Social Futures. She's previously been on the board of Queenslanders with Disabilities Network. A highly experienced NDIS and disability policy professional director, public speaker and writer, Jane blends professional expertise with her lived experience of deafblindness. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast.

Jane Britt 1:05

Thank you for having me today, Helga.

Helga Svendsen 1:07

It is so good to have you here. So Jane, I can't remember when we first crossed paths, but you've, of course, done the Take on Board Accelerator program at least once, maybe more than once, so we've

been circling in each other's orbit for a while. So I'm so glad to finally have you here on the pod, and I'm very much looking forward to the conversation about disability accessibility and inclusion. But as always, before we go there, I want to dig deeper about you. Tell me about Jane. Tell us a little about you that I might not have covered in your introduction.

Jane Britt 1:41

Yeah. So I guess, in addition to my background in disability policy, which is what I do in my day work, the things outside of that is that I am a Queensland Conservatorium Graduate. Classical piano is the thing that I guess is my life giving force. Music has always been a really big part of my life. I started playing when I was seven. I love horse riding. I took up horse riding a few years before the pandemic, and learned to ride with basic competency, but I really adore it. I'm from Lismore, originally in northern New South Wales, so country girl at heart, but now residing in Brisbane on Yuggera country. So a great thing, I guess around my day work that I get to sort of have the night interest, so to speak, in the arts and music and nature, things outside of that realm.

Helga Svendsen 2:30

Amazing. Oh my goodness. Look at you and all of your diverse interests. I've done a couple of other podcast interviews today, and the one I did earlier today was with a woman who is the chair of Pony Club Australia. So we've already been talking ponies and horse riding a little bit today, so it feels like that's the segue, but also into the arts and so on as well. But did you say you played the piano?

Jane Britt 2:51

Yeah, so classical piano. So I took that up when I was seven, and I played ever since. And you did all my grades in my letters and went to the Conservatorium and was a performance major. So for me, you know that still is the biggest part of my life and biggest part of who I am. I think it's really shaped who I am as a person. It's still the thing I turn to get me through the times that might be tough in in work or in life,

Helga Svendsen 3:16

Amazing. Okay, well, just let me dig a wee bit more then you said it's made you who you are today. Tell me more about how classical pianos made you who you are today.

Jane Britt 3:27

Yeah, I guess it's the right from the beginning, where my sister was having lessons, and I was a little bit jealous, so to speak, of hearing her produce this beautiful music, and I wanted to learn. So I

thought the best way to go about convincing my parents to give me lessons as well was to start picking out her pieces by ear on the piano. So I did that and dutifully convinced my parents that I needed lessons as well. I wasn't always the best, most diligent at practicing, but that did change as I got into my, you know, Conservatorium years, where I got a very strong rebuke after one break where I'd taken too much of a break, and I don't think I ever sort of looked back from that moment. I really decided that this is the thing that is my passion, and I'm going to really go in full throttle on what I'm doing and really commit myself to this process. And it was a really indulgent period of my life. But I guess it's someone where you learn skills around having that focus and for many, many hours at the piano or practicing. It's a, you know, marathon feat, sometimes particularly towards exam periods, where I might be at the piano for up to seven hours practicing, you develop a real, I guess work ethic and even when performances may not go as well and you are disappointed about that, I guess it's also about bouncing back from that. So I learned a lot of life lessons, I guess, alongside that, you know to be in good stead in both work and life.

Helga Svendsen 4:54

Out of interest, how often do you play now?

Jane Britt 4:56

I still play whenever I can, but it's nowhere near as consistently. I certainly don't have a daily practice regime, and it do hear the difference. I wish I could commit myself more, but unfortunately, I do cram a lot of things into my life. So I'm an expert crammer, and I really would love someday. I guess maybe in my future, I will get back to being able to play a lot more.

Helga Svendsen 5:19

Well. Before we just started recording, we were talking about all the travel you've been doing as well. And when you're a classical piano player, it's not like you can just pack the piano in your bag.

Jane Britt 5:30

Envy of the other students in the Conservatorium that they could just, you know, lug around their instrument and set up in whatever room. And not so much the case for us. And I certainly when I was in those Conservatorium years. If I was away from the piano for any extended period, it really felt almost like a grief process of being separated for the thing that is the thing that really makes me tick.

Helga Svendsen 5:50

Yes, I don't play a musical instrument, so I don't feel that myself, but I know my partner plays the guitar, and whenever we travel, I feel like I've been to every guitar shop in every city that we've ever travelled to because it just, he just likes to get in there and pick up a guitar, and it's like, oh, because if he doesn't at home, he'll play every day. But when we travel, we go to guitar shops anyway.

Jane Britt 6:14

Yeah, I got quite excited having been in Tasmania last week, where a pastor in a town in small town in Tasmania, and the shop had all sheet music, and I was just delighted to see an old school music store that I haven't seen for a long while. I unfortunately didn't we were passing through. I didn't have the time to stop, but it did make me really, I guess, touched by the fact that people obviously still connect to music enough for that to be a business that that is operating.

Helga Svendsen 6:41

Oh, lovely. All right. Well, thank you. It is always just so lovely to hear a little bit more about the person we have in front of us today. As I say, you know, you and I have been orbiting for a while, and I knew a little bit of that, but even I've learned a little bit more today. So that is fantastic. But now let's turn to our topic of the day, accessibility and inclusion in the boardroom. So maybe let's... referencing your own board experience and your own lived experience even. Where should we start this conversation about accessibility and inclusion in the boardroom?

Jane Britt 7:17

Yeah, I guess the place to really start is what I've learned, maybe through my board experiences and what I've observed as well as, I guess, the things that I have brought into the space from my disability, work and life more broadly as someone who is deaf, blind, and has been deaf, blind since birth, so my lived experience is really quite deep, because it wasn't an acquired disability. It is something that I've always had.

Helga Svendsen 7:41

Okay, well, what are some of the lessons you've learned from that, and some of the experiences, I guess, that have helped you learn those lessons?

Jane Britt 7:50

So when I first applied for the boardroom, I applied to a membership organisation, which is Queenslanders Disability Network, and I really thought that it would take more than one round of applying for to get on the board, to actually get elected to the board as a membership election. And to my surprise, I was elected in the first time that I had stood for election. So it was a very quick lesson and dive into governance at the very deep end for me, I certainly would not recommend to someone else going necessarily in that way. I think, you know, if someone did want to do training and up skilling before they stepped into the boardroom for the first time, I would be all for that approach, but it certainly did make me have to really get on top of things quickly.

Jane Britt 8:36

But I guess in the disability sense, our membership requirements are that the person has a disability. So our board is entirely comprised of people with a disability, and so I guess that boardroom in particular was quite cognizant to the experience of the disability and to accessibility and inclusion, because it's what the entire work process around that organisation was.

Jane Britt 9:00

But there were still things, you know, here and there, where we had to talk about accessibility of communications as someone who has low vision, that wasn't necessarily that they'd had someone on the board before that had my communication needs. So we did some things by trial and error. For example, I remember after our AGM when I was elected, and then I walked into the first board, we had someone who had been doing closed captioning for the AGM, but had decided to stay, to continue closed captioning the board meeting for me on a computer next to me. And that did work quite well, although we didn't continue that. But I found in that particular instance, it was a good sort of, I guess, bridge into I was quite nervous sitting in my first board meeting, but it enabled me enough to feel comfortable that my accessibility needs had been met in that moment that I had been I guess, welcomed to the board with okay, we will make accommodations to ensure that you are comfortable in this environment and able to execute your. Role effectively.

Helga Svendsen 10:01

So it was an election process to the board?

Jane Britt 10:03

Yes. We had a broad I can't remember how many candidates stood at that particular time, but as I said, I was quite surprised to be elected. But we had sort of gone through an interview process in a

couple of rounds before we got to stand for final candidature. And then it was by, you know, secret ballot election at the AGM itself.

Helga Svendsen 10:24

So there's all these nominees for the board, right? And I'm guessing there's everybody who's on that board is a person with a disability, but they'll all be different disabilities, and therefore different accessibility needs. So then you get elected, deaf, blind, has particular accessibility needs that are completely different to the person you're sitting next to, who's I don't know, got a physical disability, in a wheelchair, or whatever it may be. So for that board, that's really interesting, right? They have to plan for a whole bunch of different accessibility needs. So how do they do that? That's really interesting.

Jane Britt 10:59

I guess because the organisation is a disability, you know, membership organisation, when we do big events, we already have to sort of get the accessibility information from our membership to ensure that say, when we choose a venue, that it's wheelchair accessible, that it might be, you know, easy access for vision mobility, that someone can provide that closed captioning experience. Maybe have Auslan interpreters as well.

Jane Britt 11:23

So at the very beginning of preparing for any event and what, whether that be a boardroom meeting, or whether that be a broader say, the entire membership coming together for a particular meeting, we will be considering exactly the same thing. So physical accessibility needs, communication accessibility needs, and it's a matter, I guess, of each person, individually, we ask generally, might be through a form. It might be through emails to express what our communication or accessibility needs are, and then the planning before whatever the event is just takes those into account.

Jane Britt 11:57

So we do know the places, say, for example, our AGM. We hold it at different venues each year, but we do have a number of venues across the city that we know are physically accessible, and we will do audits of different venues before one is necessarily chosen by the board for the next AGM. So I guess there's always a principle that any event or any board meetings approached from the grounds that first, how do we make the successful? Then everything else will flow from there interesting.

Helga Svendsen 12:27

In fact, you've just prompted for me again. We were talking off air before we started, how this evening is the Take on Board alumni dinner. And I am always looking for a venue that has accessibility, and it can be quite tricky to find. And in fact, so what you just prompted for me, prompted for me is, oh, if needs be, just call Women with Disabilities Victoria, and they will no doubt have a list of all sorts of venues that are accessible, because that's what they need. So the organisation always has accessibility front of mind, of course, for all different sorts of needs. And I've got to say, what I find interesting when I run events as well, I always ask, you know, an accessibility or a reasonable adjustments question. And what is fascinating to me is that, I mean, again, when you think about it, this makes total sense. But it's not just people with disabilities that respond to the accessibility question. It's everybody, right? So you're making it accessible for everybody. It's not just inverted commas accessibility for people with disabilities. It's just accessibility, really.

Jane Britt 13:27

And that's probably the strongest argument that I ever mount when I'm asked about inclusive practice, or accessibility on the whole, that if you make it accessible for some people, you're making it accessible for everyone, because, at the very least, if you're enabling everyone in that room to participate, then surely something like larger font on something well, if someone does have 20/20 vision, it just makes it easier for them to read. So there is sort of a, I guess, broader accessibility purpose, and I think about things like when say, audio description, which is where the visual imagery on a television, movie or film or show is described for the audience, and so it goes in between the dialog, what they found was, when they say, did the user testing for it was that a much broader audience was using it. So for example, mothers that might be breastfeeding and not looking at the television, or someone that might be having a hard time following the plot line and turning it on for that reason. So and a lot of the innovations, like text messaging, is something that came around because of accessibility. It was actually an accessibility device to start with, and then look at the widespread adoption of that.

Helga Svendsen 14:41

For boards thinking about inclusivity, what are some of the things that you who works in the disability space as a woman with a disability, what are some of the things that are basically second nature to you that we might not think of? Give us some advice about the sorts of things we should think about.

Jane Britt 14:57

I was thinking about this as preparing for. For this podcast, I was looking at the Disability Royal Commission and some of the things that were discussed around disability leadership and inclusion, and something that it really pointed to, and something that we certainly talk about a lot in disability

policy, is that sort of human rights approach of disability, human rights is something, should be afforded to everyone. And so really, if you start from a human rights framework, you're approaching disability in a way that it's access for everyone.

Jane Britt 15:26

So I guess the things that really need to change around attitudes and assumptions about disability, and I think where some spaces that even do operate in the disability space, that don't have much disability leadership in their executive or in their boardrooms due to some of those assumptions around capability and capacity, and that, we call it the tyranny of low expectation, that people with disability might not necessarily be able to do certain jobs. And I remember seeing a list and a discussion that was happening on LinkedIn, and it was about what jobs could people with disability do? And all the jobs were hard labor, or cleaning or cooking and those sorts of things, whereas we started to push back on that narrative, saying no, actually medicine law, you know that disability is not necessarily not being able to do things. It's just simply a different way of doing it.

Jane Britt 16:22

I think that if we get more people to understand the human rights model of disability and social model of disability, so anyone in the boardroom thinking about this should be approaching it from those things that it is things in society that are inherently disabling, not necessarily the disability itself. So think back to say Stella Young giving her famed TED talk, and where she talked about the fact that no amount of smiling at a staircase ever turned it into a ramp. And that is kind of where people said, oh, you just need a better attitude. You know about this, and it won't be so hard, but it's actually no if there's physical access to things that are made. So when I was talking before about making sure that there's physical accessibility to the venue, then that's taking away something which is a disabling barrier for us to participate.

Helga Svendsen 17:12

Yes, sorry, I'm still laughing about no amount of smiling at a staircase turns it into a ramp. Oh, bless you. Stella Young. She was so witty.

Jane Britt 17:24

She was a powerhouse.

Helga Svendsen 17:25

Oh, my goodness, and just her pointed, witty...oh, anyway, I love it again. It's a reminder, isn't it, for those of us? Well, actually, let me talk about even the language of it. Do you use people, person with a disability is that the language you use?

Jane Britt 17:42

Well, this goes to what I was talking about with the social model of disability.

Jane Britt 17:46

So the social model of disability says it's the disability first, and so it depend on the individual language is something where there's certain terminology which is not accepted and certainly outdated, but there's other terminology where there's still questions in the community, like some people will prefer person with disability, I'm quite happily and comfortable identifying as a disabled woman like me. My disability is first. I don't separate that from my identity. It sort of is it, is it just is who I am.

Jane Britt 18:17

So, you know, language is something where I guess boardroom inclusion and accessibility could be thought about, and something I've certainly had discussions in my current boardrooms when we've talked about some of the findings of the Disability Royal Commission, I did make an approach and give a presentation to my boardroom around this and how even the Royal Commission itself, when it front loaded the report, it talked about language and talked about the social model of disability and talked about human rights model of disability, and ensured that people understand the positioning from which that comes.

Helga Svendsen 18:50

Yeah, right, so I confess I have not read the Royal Commission report.

Jane Britt 18:56

It is lengthy.

Helga Svendsen 18:58

Yeah, and it might be that I don't read the full report. I confess.

Jane Britt 19:01

It's 3000 pages, 14 volumes. The executive summary is just over 300 but it certainly is absolutely worthwhile people that are in the executive management and boardroom space reading, because when I was sort of looking again at the Royal Commission, it was talking about placing decision making in the hands of people most affected by those decisions. And then I was thinking, okay, well, where are those spaces? Everywhere. We access everything. We access employment, education, we access social and community participation. So it affects every industry and every business. So it really needs to be something that is considered in boards.

Helga Svendsen 19:40

Yeah, absolutely. And there is increasing emphasis, I guess, on diversity in the boardroom and diversity comes in many ways, shapes and forms. It's not just gender, it is culture, it is disability, it is age, it is all sorts of things. So boards need to, need to wrap their heads around it.

Jane Britt 20:00

And so I guess something I neglected to say before that, you know, when we're thinking about this, the first thing front and centre is to employ people with disability to upper management, to executive roles, to boardrooms where these decisions are being made about the things that affect our lives, and we have the best expertise. We're the best place to talk about our own disabilities and how they affect our lives. Because I often talk about the idea of when someone, say tries out being having vision impairment, by putting on a blindfold, you can take it off at the end of the day, I can't switch it off. This is my life. And so the things that are barrier this morning are still a barrier this evening, like and say that blindfold is a temporary barrier for someone else attempting to try and understand and understand that it comes from empathetic position of trying to understand. But the reality is no one is better placed to understand that experience, other than someone who does have that entire 24/7 experience of it.

Helga Svendsen 20:00

That prompts you to ask a bit of a cheeky question, Jane, and you may not want to go there, but I'm going to ask it anyway. There was a bit of media recently around Vision Australia and the appointment of their CEO by the board, a person who wasn't blind. I'm not sure if you want to go there, but I'd be interested in your reflections about that.

Jane Britt 21:19

I'm actually sitting in the United Line Leaders Group at the moment that that is campaigning, there's now six of us who are forming that group, and so we did enable the process through that open recruitment is now happening for that CEO position.

Jane Britt 21:34

But we are really committed. We're going to take this into the future, and we're doing research at the moment with our membership, and we are planning to expand on that, to look at how blind leadership operates around the world and here, and how we get more people into the positions where they are in those decision making spaces.

Jane Britt 21:53

We haven't always been given a seat at the table, and increasingly we are, but we still have a long way to go. I mean, when you see top appointments come through for, in spaces which are really directly affecting our lives, not even tangentially, then there's a real problem. And it goes back to some of those attitudes about disability. If people can see people representing in those roles, and they can shift their attitudes to okay, if someone with disabilities holding that CEO role. Well, anyone can do it, and that's how it should become a normalised thing. It shouldn't become something exceptional that someone with disability is sitting in those positions. Sometimes it is touted a little bit like, oh, wow. You know that person's exceptional for doing that? No, it should become normalised. And I realized that I'm speaking from a position of real privilege that I can articulate and speak and have been educated, and I have been afforded opportunities that I know many haven't had, but nonetheless, it sort of gives me also the understanding that I believe I could and can do anything, and I think that should be something which is more broadly understood by society.

Helga Svendsen 23:02

Yeah, hear, hear. Okay, thank you. Thank you for letting me go there. And it prompts me 50 years ago, no women-led organisations either, and women often, well to some extent still are, not necessarily seen as leadership material when, of course they are leadership material, and when, of course, they can do anything, just like people with a disability, just like people of different cultures and so on. So it makes perfect sense. But then, you know, you can't be well. In fact, I was about to say you can't be what you can't see.

Jane Britt 23:33

Yeah, no, that that is absolutely something. And it's also it's nothing about us without us. It's sort of the catch rallying, catch cry of us in terms of the human rights. You know that if you are going to go along and make decisions about things that really impact us, then take us along with you.

Jane Britt 23:50

But also, don't just take us along with you. Put us into the positions where we are directly contributing to those decisions. And I've always said, and I've heard others say too, about if you're not invited to that table, then just pull up a chair and sit there. I'm quite happy for myself and others to camp in there until we get that sort of widespread understanding and acceptance that we need to be in those spaces. I will never, ever not be a proponent of saying that disability leadership is absolutely critical everywhere.

Helga Svendsen 24:19

Absolutely. Oh, Jane, there was so much in here that is a value, I think, to boards thinking about inclusivity and accessibility. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Jane Britt 24:35

I think the thing that I really want people to take away is to there is no such thing as getting it wrong, and I know a lot of people are scared of getting it wrong, and that's why they don't go a lot near these spaces or these discussions.

Jane Britt 24:48

And it's about learning and unlearning. It's about educating and centering the voices of people with disability and learning from that direct lived experience. I mean, I've certainly had discussions in the boardroom where people have said, is that okay to say now? And we've engaged in really respectful dialog around that. May not be necessarily the best way of phrasing, but here's some other ideas. And can be done really respectfully. It's a conversation. It's not necessarily telling people you have to do this. But you know, I think that anyone should approach this from a place of curiosity, of going away learning more about the things I've tried to reference today, learning from some of the spaces where we've had the big learnings, like we've just had a four and a half year Disability Royal Commission, where so much fell out of that which I think you know, broader society could understand, understand what the experience of disability is like.

Jane Britt 25:45

And there's actually even an entire volume which is just governing for inclusion, and where they talk about what it means to have an inclusive society, what it means for us not to be on the fringes. And something that someone said at a conference last year has always stuck with me, stop treating 20% of the population as outliers. There's 5.5 million Australians with disability. We're not outliers where we are a substantive part of the population, and we need to be brought into all discussions.

Helga Svendsen 26:12

Jane, is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Jane Britt 26:16

Yes, absolutely. I really think that everyone should go and watch Stella Young's TED Talk, 'I'm not your inspiration'. It was a really seminal talk. It's something that we reference all the time. I don't know at what point, how many millions of views it's had at this point, but it really is something that has been referenced and is pivotal to the human rights movement for disability. And the disability rights movement in this country has been incredibly strong and still ongoing, but still young, was definitely one of the brightest voices in that space.

Helga Svendsen 26:46

Yeah, great. Well, we will make sure there's a link to that in the show notes, and we might also reference the Disability Royal Commission report as well. I think that might be useful for people, including me, to have a look at as well.

Jane Britt 26:58

I would strongly recommend it. And I certainly, you know, I think even you mentioned before about the strides that have been made for women who sit on boards and sit in those spaces and shifting understandings there. There's certainly, you know, a lot of research, not necessarily saying that people should traumatise themselves by going into it, deeply into this research, but the domestic and family violence research around women with disability, the intersecting identities and how say, assumptions, you know, to do with gender and assumptions to do with disability have combined together to really create a fraught space. In that sense, I think there's a lot of reading, and certainly the Royal Commission is it will contribute part of that, of understanding more about how marginalisation has occurred.

Helga Svendsen 27:42

Jane, thank you. I am so glad we finally got you behind the microphone for the podcast. So happy to have you here sharing your incredible wisdom and insights. So thank you for joining us on the Take on Board podcast today.

Jane Britt 27:56

Thank you for having me.

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