

TRANSCRIPT: More Talent Untapped

EPISODE 1 - Talent Untapped

This program is brought to you by RBC. In order to speak up for inclusion, we need to speak about inclusion.

I'm Anna-Karina Tabuñar and this is More Talent Untapped. Conversations about unconventional, sometimes underestimated talent... and the differences that connect us.

I always thought of myself as open-minded and inclusive of everyone. As a journalist, I was exposed to all sorts of situations and people. But to be honest — my view of disability was quite narrow.

In my misinformed mind, disability meant limitations. I didn't really understand disability until it happened to me. In 2009, I was diagnosed with a rare neurological illness called Miller-Fisher, a rare variant of something called Guillain-Barre Syndrome. The autoimmune disease that affected my eyes, my coordination and all of my fine motor skills. It brought big changes to every aspect of my life. And it altered the way I view disability in myself and in others.

I look at my experience as a blessing. Disability connected me to an incredible community of support, resilience and strength. It taught me that disability is another dimension of diversity. And a source of innovation.

And that's why I created the documentary Talent Untapped in 2016 — to show the innovation and talent of people with disabilities. Here's an abridged version of the original documentary. The stories you're about to hear are even more relevant today.

Ahmed Abukar has travelled a long, difficult path. It's led him here, to downtown Toronto.

Ahmed was nine when he and his family fled their home in war-torn Somalia. They settled a world away. A world Ahmed couldn't see.

Ahmed: Never discourage. Discouragement's not gonna get you far, it's is just gonna ruin your life. You gotta get back up. Keep moving forward.

Cause if you don't move forward, nobody's going to help you move forward. You gotta make that first movement before somebody else can do anything for you.

Ahmed has a rare eye disease called Leber Amaurosis. He sees colours and vague shapes. Because he was born blind, he had never set foot in a classroom.

Ahmed: I was born in Somalia, a country that's less developed than Canada, and they didn't have accommodations in place for people with a visual impairment. So up to the age of nine when I moved to Canada, I didn't go to school. So I came to Canada, I started school for the first time, coming to a new country, getting used to a new environment, and learning a new language.

He mastered a new language, he memorized transit routes to get around on his own. That little boy who started school at the age of nine is now completing his business degree.

Ahmed: The way I see it is, if I can get through that challenge, I can get through any new challenge. What I believe is that you're never dealt a challenge that you cannot handle. It's all about your hard work, determination and patience.

He'll need much more than hard work and patience to take him through his next challenge. He's trying to land his first job. So far, he's hitting barriers and rejection, employers reluctant to see beyond his white cane.

Ahmed: It's been difficult. But you got to keep trying. You get knocked down. But you got to get back up.

For the majority of people with disabilities, unemployment is a sad fact of life. More than half are without work. And if you're blind, you run an even greater risk. By some estimates, up to 90 percent of adults with vision loss are jobless. 90 percent.

Ahmed: One day the door — there will be the opportunity that you never expected.

Maureen: Hi Ahmed, nice to meet you.

Ahmed: Nice to meet you.

Ahmed is determined to beat the odds. He's come to this career fair, for people like him, and Alexis.

Alexis: Just because I'm in a wheelchair or even if you're hard of hearing, visually impaired or hearing impaired, it doesn't matter. It doesn't mean we can't do the job. It just means we need to do it in a different way.

Ahmed: I had an employer ask me, "Are you able to show up to work by yourself?" And what I always tell them is if public transportation can get there, I can get there.

Maureen Haan heads the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work.

Maureen: We've got an untapped pool of talent of people with disabilities that are ready to work.

It's hosting this job fair to change the conversation around disability. There's a common misperception that disability is a liability. Too costly in the workplace.

Maureen: The most common myths right now are that it's very expensive to accommodate a person with a disability in the workforce.

The average cost of accommodation is \$500. That's a one-time cost, according to a survey of U.S. employers. In most cases, there's no cost at all. The number one accommodation is attitude, a shift in focus from disability to capability.

Ahmed: There's hidden potential here that needs to be sought.

Ahmed is part of the largest minority group on the planet – one billion strong – and growing. According to the United Nations, the average person, that's you and I, will spend about eight years living with a visible or invisible disability. I never ever thought about disability until it happened to me, when I became one of the statistics.

In 2009, I was diagnosed with a neurological illness, a rare variant of something called Guillain-Barre Syndrome. My immune system attacked

my peripheral nervous system and my eyes. I had no sensation in my legs, arms and face. My vision became terribly distorted. The worst part was I couldn't read with my children. I couldn't see the details of their faces.

I wrote and spoke for a living. I was a broadcast journalist, then a corporate spokesperson. All of a sudden, everything I needed to do to earn a living was out of focus – out of reach. I was deemed DISABLED. The word alone made me question my value and my future as a productive, working professional.

Paul: You have this notion that you're ironclad. And it's quite a shock when you realize that you know, you are disabled.

My friend Paul Wing understood what I was going through. The uncertainty. The indignity. He had travelled a similar journey two years earlier.

Paul: Being a videographer was my identity. My life. And it was over. Like that.

Paul was an award-winning videographer at one of the top newsrooms in Canada. He shot the interviews and images. I wrote and delivered the stories. We were colleagues for a decade.

Paul: Together we did it, we filmed interviews with disabled people. I never thought I'd be on the other end. It all came to a head at the Ottawa Senator's hockey team practice. I was with my reporter and we went into the scrum, and I just started to shake. And actually, they stopped the scrum and took me aside and sat me down. And that's when I realized it was over.

Working in the news business means moving fast and making quick decisions. Paul was slowing down dramatically, the effects of Parkinson's Disease.

Paul: It's basically my legs won't work. I get dizzy. I freeze up. I become a statue. Your mind is ahead of you, but your body can't catch up. But it goes away, sometimes it's five minutes, sometimes it's half an hour. It was a shock, I was wandering around. Getting up in the morning thinking I was going to work, then realizing I wasn't. But basically, realized I had to make up my own schedule. I had to do something.

He spent the next few months honing that something. And in the process, my old colleague showed me a new face of disability.

Linda: Sometimes they've lost hope. They're not getting jobs.

Linda Simpson is often the last hope for job seekers. She runs a business called Performance Plus Rehabilitative Care.

Linda: We basically help people with disabilities return to the workforce. And we've been doing that for approximately 20 years.

Her clients come to her after an illness, injury or new diagnosis. Linda's client base is up 50 percent this year compared to last year.

Linda: In particular those that are 18 to 30. Young adults. We're seeing more and more A.D.D., more learning disabilities. Those I think are really the primary areas.

Most have a college or university education. And they're hungry for work. The problem is, employers are hesitant to hire them.

Linda: It's just really difficult to engage an employer at the very beginning. It's that they have fears of bringing a person on with a disability. They don't know what to do.

Four million Canadians live with disabilities. Half aren't participating in the workforce. Not because they don't want to work or aren't capable of working. They're simply not on the radar of most employers. All that talent – untapped, wasting away.

Per Scott heads Human Resources for RBC. He also volunteers with Canadian Business SenseAbility, a nonprofit that promotes the business benefits of workers with disabilities. His case is simple and powerful. Tap into the talent pool and gain a foothold into a lucrative market. At the same time, provide meaningful work and create the first ripple.

Per Scott: The ripple effect of that is people pay taxes. People spend their money. They drive consumer choices. They consume bank services, bank

products. It's a productive market segment, quite frankly. And it's an attractive market segment.

Attractive to the tune of \$8 trillion in spending power when you factor in family and friends. That's the calculation of a report called The Global Economics of Disability.

Beyond the business benefits, there's a profound personal impact that comes with meaningful employment. It's a life-changing impact on our most vulnerable and invisible.

Compared to the general population, people with disabilities run a greater risk of poor health, physical abuse and isolation. Linda Simpson sees it everyday, from client to client.

Linda: It's all about seeing that person achieve that wonderful success because what happens is you're helping people put their lives back together. Because most of the people that we serve live below the poverty line.

\$12,000 a year. That's the average government support for someone with a disability. It's difficult for me to imagine scraping by on that small amount. I had worked all my adult life, earning a good living. And all of a sudden, disability payments were on my horizon.

How could that support me and my family? Most people with disabilities want to get off social assistance and take part in the workforce. But here's the dilemma: Do you rely on a predictable, poverty-level income? Or do you look for the right employer and jeopardize your thin safety net? Earning even a small paycheck can claw back disability payments. The complex system leaves little incentive to work. And that needs to change.

Linda: We had a gentleman who returned to work and it had been 10 years since he worked. He said to me, really I forgot what it was like to be integrated into the work environment and have a social life. And he was deprived of that that whole time. And we take it for granted. People come to us and say you changed my life and I can't thank you enough.

When your abilities change, and your body no longer does what you want it to do, how can you keep working? What do you do with the career aspirations you once had?

Kent Kirkpatrick struggled with the very questions I was grappling with.

Kent: What does this mean from an employment perspective? What does it mean in terms of the financial stability of my family and the rest? I was intensely focused on being successful in the workplace.

Kent is the city manager for Canada's fourth largest city. He oversees 17,000 employees, a \$3 Billion budget, and all the operations that run the nation's capital.

Every time Kent rolls into a meeting, he challenges the way most people think of their leaders.

Kent: Someone who's got not just intelligence, but gravitas and presence.

He was 37 and soaring up the corporate ladder. Then the unexpected hit. A diagnosis of multiple sclerosis – a degenerative auto-immune disease that strikes the central nervous system. For the first six years, he told no one at work. He couldn't communicate a prognosis he could not accept.

Kent: And then you get to the point where you need to tell people, either because it's becoming obvious or in my case, there was a question of being considered for a new position and I felt it only fair that the employer knew.

He immerses himself in his work with complex files and long hours. His energy and mobility are a constant concern.

Kent: I need to be more focused than when I didn't have a physical disability, I need to be more self-aware.

For Kent, that means planning and scheduling every activity, like the stretches that help prevent muscle cramps. His meetings are spaced out to give him ample rest time. He keeps his office at a cool 18 degrees Celsius because his body is extremely heat-sensitive. Kent adapts his workspace and work habits so he can keep working.

But he's the exception, not the rule. More than a third of Canadian employees do not receive the accommodations they need. Some workers keep their disabilities a secret to protect their jobs.

Jan: So, I couldn't work, and then it got really even worse because my employer didn't believe that I was sick. And that just made it, the whole thing magnified about ten times.

Jan Wong was a provocative columnist and author. Her career took a turn after she disclosed an invisible disability. Jan chronicled her breakdown in her book *Out of the Blue*.

Jan: In 2006, I covered a school shooting in Montreal, and there was a really bad backlash, very racist backlash. And I was quite shocked and I started to not be able to sleep and then I became clinically depressed. And I wasn't able to work because I had no memory, and I couldn't remember anything. And I couldn't write so I couldn't work. Basically, couldn't function.

She was battling severe depression and skeptical bosses.

Jan: They kept saying you have to come back, you have to come back. You're not sick. You know, we don't think you're sick.

That led to a nasty workplace divorce with legal action and lawsuits. She says her split from her employer helped her put her life back in harmony. She also credits medication, counselling, and music.

Jan: The thing to understand about depression is it doesn't last forever. And in my case, it was workplace triggered, so when I got out of that situation, I actually recovered. So I'm not depressed now. However, anyone who's suffered a clinical depression has a 50 percent chance of a relapse. So I'm constantly aware, and wary.

Maureen: We are seeing a lot more people with episodic disabilities, especially as the people with the episodic disability start to take ownership of their disability.

Maureen Haan speaks for the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work. The Council is helping a growing number of employees work through

flare ups of disability. The most prevalent is mental illness, and it's the leading cause of disability in the workplace. Other employees are working through chronic fatigue and pain, as well as MS, arthritis, diabetes and certain cancers.

The rise in episodes of disability is a loud cry for more flexibility at work.

Maureen: People with episodic disabilities, for example, may need shiftwork. They may need to do some sharing of duties. But it's also the social stigma of episodic disabilities. Somebody with MS might be just fine today but then tomorrow can't move. Somebody with depression might be able to feel their depression coming on but can't do anything to stop it, and then they're in a full bout of depression, which makes them not be able to work.

Kent: We as a society need to be a lot better at understanding the ability of people with all kinds of disabilities, but the ability of people even with those disability to be very effective and productive. We get so much self-actualization and personal wealth out of doing something and doing it well, and contributing. And so much of that is through opportunities of employment.

In a stainless steel commercial kitchen, I meet Michael Black. This is his work place, the place that changed his life. Michael is deaf. He is a dishwasher here.

Michael: If I was not working here what would I be doing? Most of the time, I might be staying at home, playing computer games, looking for a job. It was always hard to find work because most of the jobs are not really able to let deaf people work because they require interpreters. It cost more money. For me to work here, I'm lucky. Thank you for the opportunity.

His gratitude is striking. So is the pride he takes in his work. Michael enjoys the physical, predictable routine here. His job with Sodexo Canada gives him much more than a paycheck. It affords him an opportunity to build a new life with new friends. Like Danica – his bride-to-be.

Sean: We communicate a lot with hands.

Sean Callahan is their boss.

Sean: Did you want to say hello to our friends here that came for a visit?

He supervises a remarkable mix of employees. Remarkable because one in five has a physical or developmental challenge.

Sean: We have some that are hearing-impaired. Some have learning disabilities, as well as autism, Asperger's.

They're part of an emerging talent pool. In the U.S. alone, more than 50,000 young adults with intellectual disabilities hit working age every year. Workers like them are essential to Sean Callaghan's production line.

Sean: It's just the morale. They're engaged and they sound happy to be part of the team.

Vanessa: There is a massive, untapped, highly skilled market sitting out there, yet we're trying to figure out ways as Canadian employers, to face the labour shortage.

Vanessa White is a human resources executive. She specializes in building inclusive workplaces, to boost productivity and profitability.

Vanessa: We found increases in employee engagement, we've seen better retention numbers, and we've seen higher levels of client loyalty and customer satisfaction.

She has much more to say, but first, I need to catch up with a couple of fast entrepreneurs. Off a quiet country road, Mark and Valerie Wafer invite me for a spin.

Mark: This is the Porsche GT3-RS. One of the fastest cars ever made.

As he revs up Lola, his race car, it's hard to imagine Mark Wafer idle. But he knows exactly what it's like to lag behind.

Mark: I have about 20 percent hearing. I understand the barriers. I grew up with those barriers. You know, well-meaning people who thought they knew what was best for me. 30 years ago, the landscape was very different.

People with disabilities simply didn't get jobs. So I had to do and say whatever it took to get a job.

Mark hid his disability for years. He could lip read. And he could crank up the charm.

Mark: I had a little bit of confidence. I was able to get into the workplace. My problem was keeping the job. As soon as the boss found out that Mark was deaf, there was always a reason to get rid of him. Usually a bad reason.

Instead of working for someone else, he became his own boss. He and Valarie bought their first food franchise. One of their first hires put them on an unexpected course.

Mark: When I hired the first person with a disability 20 years ago. He walked into the store and applied for a job that I was advertising, and he had down syndrome. I knew that if I didn't hire him he was going to fall into all of those traps that I did.

They own and operate seven franchises. Workers like their first hire help them out-perform their competitors.

Mark: Our turnover rate of our 250 employees is 38 percent per year. And the average for the QSR business across Canada is about 100 percent. And it's a very high cost associated with turnover. Our absenteeism rate is lower. Our innovation rate is higher. Our productivity rate is higher. And our safety rating is much better.

Valarie: One of the wonderful byproducts of having an inclusive employee base is the culture that happens in your business. And we have amazing group of employees who work for us in all of our locations. And they stay for a long time too.

Reason for another victory lap. The disability that Mark once hid is a reason for his success. It opened his business to a whole new talent pool.

It's easy for organizations to say they're inclusive. But how do they put it into practice? They start by making sure that everyone has access to the front door – whether it's the physical or the virtual door.

Vanessa White explains.

Vanessa: You have to make sure your websites, your career sites are accessible to all employees, whether they have disabilities or don't have disabilities. It can be something as simple as doing phone interviews instead of face-to-face interviews to make sure that you're removing bias, making sure your company policies don't have hidden bias in them.

Progressive employers tell me that disability is one facet of diversity. A tool to tap into an emerging market. A business advantage that leverages the determination that navigates barriers every day.

Vanessa: We can talk all day long about being diverse and inclusive and hiring people with disabilities as something that feels good or feels right to do in society. The reality is it's really good for your business.

Paul: "Oh it's that guy down the street that's got Parkinson's. There's something wrong with him." It's like taking out the garbage and stuff, right. I'll be taking it out and get stuck in the driveway.

Paul Wing had to put down his video camera because of Parkinson's disease. But he never gave up his eye for an exquisite shot. My old colleague found a new medium to express his talent. A still camera with a built-in stabilizer.

Paul: Now I'm Paul Wing the photographer. So that's pretty cool. It's nice to be described that way.

On his good days, he takes in all the colours and movements around him and frames them into unique images. Every year, he opens his home studio to patrons. What began as a distraction is now a small business.

From Paul, I learned that disability doesn't diminish talent – it forces creativity to bypass the barriers.

Paul: It's really been edifying. It's a refuge. Once you get into your photographic zone, there's nothing else. You don't have a disability. You're just a photographer. You're not a guy with Parkinson's.

It took me about three years to recover from my neurological illness. I still have residual effects. Mainly fatigue and damage to my optic nerves. I'm managing glaucoma which can lead to progressive vision loss.

As for work, I tried to go back to my old job. But I couldn't do the high-paced, high-pressure work. Not with my new normal. Nor could I rely on a paltry disability income. Not for me and my family. So I took a risk. I left a steady job and paycheck. I was fortunate to be able to carve out a new coaching and consulting business. And I never take this for granted. I make my own accommodations day to day. I maximize every able moment.

Remember Ahmed Abukar? We first met him on his job hunt. Well, after many months and too many rejections to count, he finally landed his first job. An internship as a financial analyst.

Ahmed: It took a long time, took a lot of rejections. But I didn't look at it as a rejection. I looked at it as another thing I just gotta overcome. And I got to continue up this road. And hopefully I will get to the top of the hill soon.

Ahmed aspires to become a banking executive like Per Scott, who's paying a surprise visit today. The new hire is trying to keep his cool. He tells the VP that he's grateful to work here.

Ahmed uses screen reading software to translate numbers and charts. Many of his colleagues, like Sharon Singh, forget he's blind.

Sharon: I think people forget all the time because when he's sitting down he's just like everyone else. He's doing his role. And I see the team coming together and really looking at him, like hey, here's someone who we perceive that may have all these disadvantages. But look at what he's doing and he's performing well. So I think it's changing peoples' mindset and making them look at people differently.

Ahmed: I don't see us as people with a disability. I see us as people with different challenges. And we have the same abilities as everybody else, when we're given our accommodation. And we can accomplish the tasks as required of us. Just like them. I feel like I've accomplished a lot but not enough. Not enough. I still got more to go. One thing I hope to one day accomplish is to become a mentor and mentor somebody and make a

difference in their life in honor of the people who have made a difference in my life.

The documentary film Talent Untapped was first broadcast in 2016. If you're interested in a special screening of the original film, please send me a note through my website: annakarintabunar.com. And we'll put that link in the show notes. I have to give a very special shout out to the superbly talented Erin Saoirse Adaire, because she provided the original sound track for the film. You can discover more of her work by checking out the link in the show notes.

More Talent Untapped is made possible by our sponsors RBC and EARN - the Employment Accessibility Resource Network, an initiative of United Way East Ontario.

The people who helped put together this show are: Lindsey Vodarek, Howard Sonnenberg, Ashley Wright, Colin Van Hattem and me, Anna-Karina Tabunar.

I'm back in two weeks with another episode of More Talent Untapped.

If you haven't already, please subscribe to the podcast, give it a review or rating, and share it to help us get the word out.