

**Gwen Wilcox:**

Hello and welcome to the Women in the COO Community podcast series. My name is Gwen Wilcox and I am the Chief Operating Officer of Armstrong Wolfe the financial services COO advisory firm, and global leader of the Women in the COO Community programme.

'WCOOC' or Women in the COO Community is a space for people centric conversations with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion topics pertinent to the industry, and how these impacts individuals and organisations - whether this be acquisition and retention of staff, managing strategy and people or simply the sharing of practice and opportunity for career development. Our aim is to increase awareness of the opportunities that are available at all career levels, and help you to think about what's next for you.

Through this series, we hope to bring you insights from the minds and experiences of financial services most successful leaders, unlocking some of the lessons that they've learned, in the hope that you, our listeners, can apply these to your careers and lives.

I am so excited for today's conversation, and delighted to welcome director of inclusive design, Interbrand, UK Government disability sector champion and member of the Forbes 30 Under 30 - Marianne Waite. I'd like to ask you to share a little bit about yourself, please Marianne, and what inspired you to have the career you have to date? Welcome to you. Excited that you are here today.

**Marianne Waite:**

Thank you so much for having me, I'm really excited too! And I appreciate that this is a podcast, so no one will be able to see me. But if you're interested, I am a white cisgender female. And I'm currently speaking to you all from London. And I'm very sad because I was meant to have a haircut yesterday, long awaited and it didn't happen. So I'm looking pretty dishevelled. And looking forward to things opening back up again.

But look, I've got a lot of personal experience with disability and exclusion. And I spent most of my life thinking that the lives and circumstances of people who were affected by disability, were always going to be a little bit worse, or in some cases, a lot worse than non disabled people. And it was kind of throughout my career, I kind of leant in to disability activism, and looking at how design specifically can either design in people with disabilities, or can design out disabled people. So I entered into the world of design and branding about 14 years ago, and continued my kind of interest or pursue my interest in what's called inclusive design, which is how you can remove barriers for people from different groups by simply designing with them, and being led by their experiences.

And so I couldn't understand why the kind of the world of mainstream design and creativity was kind of continuing to leave out the perspective of, of disabled people and, and older people as well. And those people who also identify as, as you know, neurodiverse, or those who have got kind of chronic illness, because you know, there's a big conversation to be had around kind of disability and identity. But those conversations weren't happening, right. And so about four years ago, I set up a nonprofit called 'Think Designable', which was all about providing thought leadership around inclusive design and disability inclusion, and how the

power of mainstream brands and brand experience could be doing a lot more to work in the needs and the expectations of these audiences.

So quite simply, my kind of mission or ambition at the moment is to open up a dialogue with people who have got experience of disability in order to put inclusive design at the heart of brand and customer experiences. Because we'll probably get into this but I'd say maybe 90% of the conversations that happen around disability inclusion relate to employee experience, which is hugely important because there's a lot of work to be done in that area. But one of the things that business hasn't been focusing on is accessibility from a customer perspective. Yeah, it's a huge conversation, but I'm always very happy to have it.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

No, absolutely. I'm so delighted to have you, it's such an important topic. So in our conversations leading to the to this to this chat, and this podcast we you've mentioned the 'pillars of inclusivity'. So I could see on your email signature as well. Three little hearts and an actually I've never seen this before. So you have three different symbols Haven't you? You have one light blue or rainbow, and then one with varying shades of black, brown and tan, so inclusive, obviously you obviously, live and breathe this and you've got this really nice image and what do they mean? Just so we are aware..

**Marianne Waite:**

You mean the the icons within the email signature of interbrand? They show, they depict interbrand's commitment to disability, sorry to diversity, equity and inclusion. So I think the main purpose of those different symbols, and everyone within Interbrand displays them within their email, shows that we are a culture that respects many different perspectives and identities, whether that's kind of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, and disability, it's really kind of, you know, just showing, and a reminder, I guess, to both our clients and our colleagues, that this is something that sits very much at the heart of what we do.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

And that's fascinating, I think we need to start adopting that. And I also like the hashtags underneath as well. And that's great.

**Marianne Waite:**

I want to say something pretty controversial, but also, I think, an indicator of commitment to action, as opposed to getting this right, because we are still kind of, you know, right at the beginning of our journey of understanding the extent of what needs to be done and how people are still being excluded. So I think there's kind of a temptation for businesses to pat themselves on their back. And we really must acknowledge that actually, there is so much we don't know. So this is kind of, you know, an acknowledgment that we are accountable rather than we know, we're getting it right.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

Sure. And obviously, actions speak louder than words. So whilst obviously it's so important to talk about these topics, in genuine, genuine conversations around increasing accessibility and disability awareness, talking isn't enough, is it? So we acknowledge there, there needs

to be action. Question for you. How can brands and businesses start to operationalize inclusivity?

**Marianne Waite:**

So this is a really good question. And I think the first thing I would say is, there's a temptation and there is a trap that we can fall in, to want to become the Saviour, the brand wants to be the Saviour. And this is not, this is not about being a saviour. And to kind of, and it's not always about necessarily focusing on the business and brand opportunity - and there are many opportunities there, but this is really now I think, especially with everything that's going on in the US about, like I say, accountability and responsibility for meeting the expectations of people from different communities.

So number one, I think first is acknowledgement of the need to be accountable. And we're seeing that there are more and more kind of C-suite leaders leaning into this space, again, not from the position of being your saviour or the solution, but realising their role in unlocking the resources to get this right. So first of all, I think it's about acknowledging within business, that there needs to be intention, and acknowledgement from those at the very, very top of the business. And I'm not just talking about people who are kind of in charge of DEI so we still, I think, fall into this trap of thinking that this is the responsibility of diversity and inclusion heads or of HR. And really, this isn't. This is, that's why I'm so excited to speak to you, I think is from kind of a CEO perspective, we need to be operationalizing this in a much deeper way. And, and ensuring that every department head understands what their role is in removing barriers.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

The drivers of change. Absolutely.

**Marianne Waite:**

Exactly. And so I think there's also kind of a sense of humanity and self awareness needs to come from this leadership, because, you know, there is still so much that businesses is getting wrong. And there's so much history to kind of how people have been oppressed. And so the key to kind of overcoming that is having very open dialogues with people at a grassroots level. And the kind of exciting thing is, is that there will be so many people within our organisations that have got experience that will help to improve the situation. And so it's about really listening hard to those who can support leadership to get there. So number one is kind of, you know, like accountability, acknowledgement, understanding who needs to be involved in order to make this happen. And then also crucially, listening. This is this is such an important thing to do is is kind of, you know, really understanding what isn't working currently in order to create that roadmap for change.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

So have you got any examples where you think this has been done really well?

**Marianne Waite:**

Any examples of who's listening? Well, I think what's interesting about organisations such as 'The Valuable 500' is that they're kind of having this excellent conversation around, yes, CEOs now need to be leading in, they can't kind of delegate the responsibility for for change

in this respect. But I think, you know, I would be really hesitant to give names of brands who are getting it right from an operational perspective, because I think there's actually still so much that needs to be done to get there. And I think there are kind of pockets of activity that are very encouraging.

So we're seeing, you know, brands start to come up with much more disability lead solutions around products around services. And we started to see, you know, much more attention being paid to how we can create cultures that are much more disability inclusive, we're seeing lots of people lean into this idea of kind of creating employee resource groups and some such, so there are lots of little pockets of positive change. But actually, in terms of really getting it right across every aspect, that's something that I think we still need to work on. Case in point, we have lots of talk about.

So from a consumer perspective, every time I ask my disabled friends who their preferred brand would be or their favourite brand is, they will say Apple without a doubt, and they would probably say, the Apple iPhone, as well, in terms of being kind of, you know, an iconic assistive solution. However, then when you speak to people about what happens within the culture within the organisation, there are lots of kind of, you know, challenges around not just people with disabilities, but also other facets of diversity, or who are impacted by different facets of diversity, that are kind of, you know, potentially not supporting the right way. So this is why I think the kind of operational piece or operationalizing inclusivity is such an interesting conversation to have, because it's only by understanding the entire ecosystem that we can start to claim we're doing things in the right way.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

Absolutely. And would you say culture is the main barrier to operate operationalizing inclusivity?

**Marianne Waite:**

So I think we normally talk about three different pillars. Culture is one of them. So if we look at leadership, and we look at kind of, you know, what people within the business are doing to report, measure, and create the right environment for change from kind of, you know, an accountability perspective, that's huge. Culture, again, is a huge key or is a huge part of kind of getting this right, because you have to have the right perspectives within an organisation. And you have to be able to make sure that those people from different communities feel empowered. And so, unless you're doing that correctly, you're not going to be able to reflect an external view that connects with kind of a wider, a wider audience. But then there's also the brand and the customer piece, too. And I think that's kind of a piece that historically has been overlooked, especially from a disability perspective.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

So all teams across the whole organisation need to work as one.

**Marianne Waite:**

I was just gonna say that, you know, what I'm excited about with this new proposition at Interbrand, and what we're doing, is we're looking at the pursuit of barrier free brand experience. So again, it's an acknowledgement that we need to be doing much more. And

it's the responsibility of brand leaders and brand builders to remove those barriers by taking the lead from people with disabilities.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

And interestingly, you've obviously mentioned leadership and leadership is very much at the heart of what we do, and obviously this year the COOs are very much the leader in transformation of space. And, and obviously, it's important to have allies in the C suite. Of course it is! And there's been a lot of talk about different leadership styles, obviously, as a result of the pandemic, and how managers need to understand their employees and obviously, their employees needs. So what impact does, does having a C suite ally have on inclusive of inclusion and inclusion of progress?

**Marianne Waite:**

I think there's a really clear link between the board and between the rest of the organisation so you need someone who is accountable to report back to the CEO and to report back to the board on whichever objectives and measures there are in place. Otherwise, you know, change won't happen.

So you mentioned the pandemic that which is really interesting, because, for the last 30 years, disabled people in the UK at least have been campaigning for employers to be much more flexible in terms of how they can work and have been campaigning for things like flexible working, working from home and have been told repeatedly that it's too difficult. It's too expensive and it can't be done and yet last year, As a result of the kind of limitations from the pandemic, we saw businesses were able to really quickly change the way they were working in order to provide those kinds of flexible means. So what's been fascinating over the last, the last 12 months, 18 months has been, actually when businesses wants to, they can respond to those needs, and they can do it pretty rapidly. And so that's why kind of, you know, you need everyone at board level to understand why this is so crucial, and what more importantly, what their role is.

So that's what I guess I'm trying to kind of explain is that, like I say, historically, this has been left to poor old DEI leaders or Chief Diversity Officers, but you need every single person to understand what they need to be doing to help deliver this. So you know, for instance, it's brilliant to use disability lead insights and insights from older people, for instance, to improve accessibility of products and services. But actually, if your marketing department doesn't understand how to effectively tell their stories, and communicate this to a wider audience, their stories will get lost.

Similarly, it's one thing to kind of have a lovely big PR story about potentially creating an accessible product. But if there's also a story in the news about how your employees are being let down, that's going to, you know, cause challenges and reputational harm, so it also actually societal harm. So it's really about kind of understanding the different aspects of what we call brand experience, and how we can be addressing and identifying barriers across each area to make sure that businesses and brands are authentically living their values.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

Thank you for that that's really helpful. And I think we all have a part to play, every single individual in our organisation has got a little part to play, or be part to play in becoming, making an environment more inclusive. I am also keen on obviously measuring and measuring progress, we are all keen on ensuring that everything is measured anyway, these days, and what doesn't get measured doesn't get done. So we see a lot of benchmarks and quotas to be met, especially when it comes down to recruitment and senior managers. Obviously, you have that responsibility, but is inclusivity measured in the same way do you think?

**Marianne Waite:**

I think inclusivity is so yes, so like I said, the kind of employment piece is really key to this. I think it's worth noting that when it comes to disability employment, there are sometimes different barriers that need to be addressed, for instance, actual physical barriers, whether that's kind of like, you know, applying for jobs, finding, searching jobs, website accessibility, application. Accessibility, you know, whether even traditional CV submissions are the right way to do it versus other means of assessing a candidate's suitability. So there are kind of, so when compared to other facets of DEI, I think accessibility plays a slightly different role. It needs a slightly different approach.

But beyond employment, I think when it comes to kind of disability, inclusion and inclusivity, there are different factors, we need to be taking into account as well. So kind of wider accessibility measures and, and much like sustainability in a way we need to kind of be thinking about this on a much deeper level. So like I say, assessing the customer experience as well as the employee experience, but also what does this mean for procurement and for suppliers to make sure that you know, we're educating and working with the right people who are aligned with our our own mission and our own values?

**Gwen Wilcox:**

I do hope we have a tonne of COOs listening to this because is that they can certainly make this happen. I also wanted to know before we close, I wanted to know where where shall we go? What portal shall we go to? Where should we go and educate ourselves further

**Marianne Waite:**

So one thing you could do is come and speak to me at Interbrand, because we're currently in the process of working with our talent, our clients, and our expert disability partners to find the answers to some of these challenges. So the key thing here is that it's a very collaborative approach, we must take the lead from disabled people and disabled experts, both in the UK, but we're also starting to work with those and other regions as well, because you know, the topic of disability is such a fast one. And there are many different perspectives coming in from different regions. So if you are interested, do come and have a talk with us because we're taking a very different approach to other organisations and like I say, what we're trying to do is push ourselves and our clients to understand what this means across the entire organisation and experience.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

Totally. And one thing to remember is it's not just a physical disability that we are talking about here, there is also the invisible disability, which is even sometimes much, much, much harder to to recognise.

**Marianne Waite:**

On that, I was just gonna say one of the things we're exploring at the moment is this kind of link between, or the balance between, looking at user capabilities and common challenges, both across kind of sensory, cognitive and physical capabilities. And so you know, you might have age related challenges, or disabilities that are very similar to other kinds of medical diagnosis disabilities. And so what we're trying to do is look at how we can remove barriers across those different needs states, for instance, you know, we might enjoy captions on a video, because we don't have sound on our device, not just because we are deaf or hard of hearing. And so there are kind of lots of inclusive, you know, solutions that make life better for everyone. But I think it's also making sure that we're not negating or erasing the actual experience of disabled people and disabled identity within that. So it's a real balance between trying to move away from a place where there are unhealed, there's an unhelpful use of labelling, but at the same time making sure that we are really championing the experience of different individuals.

**Gwen Wilcox:**

Indeed, and you're doing a great job at that. So thank you for all you do. So Marianne, it has been an absolute pleasure talking to you today. I am delighted that you agreed to join us to talk about, and educate us also, on disability and inclusion. I hope to see you very soon. Thank you.

**Marianne Waite:**

Thank you for having me.