

Disability Pride Month - a fireside chat about diversity, equity and inclusion, and what action pension funds can take on disability.

Karen Shackleton: My name is Karen Shackleton and I'm the Founder and Chair of Pensions for Purpose. And today I'm talking with Bruna Bauer, our Research Manager, and Constance Johnson, who has just joined us as a Research Intern. So let's start with Bruna. Could you just tell us a little bit about yourself, Bruna?

Bruna Bauer: Yeah, sure. So very nice to be here talking to you today. So my name is Bruna. I'm originally Brazilian. I've been living in the UK for the past three years now but it feels much more. So I've always been, my background is in international relations and economics. But luckily when I was, when I first moved to Glasgow, when I started my Masters in Political Economy, I had the opportunity to work doing the COP 26.

So it was, it was just an amazing experience because it really opened my mind to the field of sustainable finance and impact investing. And it was just an amazing, amazing opportunity because it was at the very beginning of my Masters' programme. And then it was great because then I found this, this kind of focus to carry on throughout my time, Masters journey. And then during my Masters, I've got a few internships focused on sustainable finance. I've written my thesis focused on the carbon markets and some strategies to make the carbon market a little bit more successful. And I also started my internship at Pensions for Purpose, focused on research.

Karen Shackleton: So tell us a little bit about some of the projects that you've been working on since you joined Pensions for Purpose.

Bruna Bauer: Mm-hmm. So, of course, the project with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion was, it was just amazing because it was a project that I could see from the very beginning. So when I first joined, I think there were, we were starting to conduct the interviews. So it was an amazing learning process for me because I could see the process, the very start of the project and then it could carry on with the interviews, kind of find myself as well, the way to, to move on with the project. Karen, she gave me a lot of space to do that, a lot of freedom as well to put my own inputs and to create my own way to carry on the research as well.

So carried on 21 interviews for that project. And for me, it was very interesting because, as someone who's not from the UK, learning about the how pension schemes work in the UK has been, it's been a process, it's been a journey. It's quite a complex world, but it's just very rewarding to see how fast I've been learning. Of course, there is a long journey on the way, but it's been a very fast process as well. And it was a project focused on diversity, equity and inclusion, which is something that is very close to my heart as well. So there was a very, very interesting project to see how asset owners are perceiving diversity, equity and inclusion.

And then through that project, we started to implement as well a section focused on best practice in our reports. So I think there was one of the main takeaways for myself in that research, because we do see a lot of potential from our research where I think, especially when it comes to sharing best practice, it could be with allocation to emerging economies, for example, which is a project that we're carrying on at the moment, diversity, equity and inclusion, impact investing in private debt, for example, which is another project that we carry on as well. I think it's very important to share those best practices with the industry and give our contribution to how on how the industry can advance in in those topics.

Karen Shackleton: So you've been promoted, now you're working full time for us as Research Manager and what have you got planned? So what have you got planned for the rest of the year?

Bruna Bauer: Now, of course we've got a lot of projects, research projects, lined up already. We are currently working on a project focused on allocation to emerging markets. So this is taking quite some time for us as well. And I, I do have the feeling that because Impact Lens is a project that started maybe a couple years ago, Karen, is that correct?

Karen Shackleton: Yes it is

Bruna Bauer: So as time passes, we do see a lot of interest coming from the industry, in moving on with the research, we do see that Impact Lens as a whole, as a sector for Pensions for Purpose, is getting a lot of shape. So we're developing a lot of new ideas. So one example, as I mentioned before is having this session focused on best practice, for example. So we are currently studying how we can develop another project focused on discussing those best practices with markets. So having some thematic groups for example.

So there are a lot of newer ideas popping up. We're currently discussing that internally, but it's just, there's just so many nice projects on the way. Very, very, very important topics for us to, to carry out some research as well. So I think it's just, we do have a lot of ideas, so it's just now giving, giving a little bit more structure to those ideas. And yeah, keeping with the research.

Karen Shackleton: Yes, I'm a great fan of saying "there are only so many hours in the day".

Well, look, it's time to talk to Constance. Constance, you've just joined as a Research Intern. So tell us a little bit about your background, what you've been studying, where you've been studying.

Constance Johnson: So I've just finished literally just finished my degree at the University of East Anglia. I did psychology, which I loved very much, especially the research side of it, hence the Research Intern. And I graduate on the 17th of July. So I'm, I'm nearly there, getting my, my degree.

I did A-levels in English Literature, Psychology, and Health and Social Care. And I've always been very much caring about people and hence why I'm here; like in I want to make a difference for people. It's always been like a personal project of mine, but being able to actually align that with my work now is really an amazing thing to be able to do.

Karen Shackleton: Absolutely. And you had some stiff competition for the role, you've done incredibly well to make it through to be.

Constance Johnson: Thank you.

Karen Shackleton: I wanted to discuss disability with you. Can you perhaps first of all, talk about your personal experience of living with a disability?

Constance Johnson: Yep. So when I was 16, I started to have symptoms, fainting, dizziness, tiredness, and we weren't sure what was wrong with me. I'm very lucky to have two parents that were very, you know, taking me to doctors' appointments and making sure they figured out what was wrong. And I was diagnosed with postural tachycardia syndrome, which is a bit of a mouthful, we call it POTS, at the age of 16. And it did really turn my life upside down. I went from being a healthy 16 year old, doing everything that I wanted to do, you know, to having restrictions on where I could go, what I could do. And I'm lucky that, you know, the doctors gave me medicines and I was a lot better. But it can never go back to normal. And, since then, I've been diagnosed with two more conditions connecting them. I have celiac disease and I have chronic fatigue, which both affect me in different ways. But it has been difficult balancing being disabled and being, you know, in education and in work.

But I'm lucky that I have been so blessed to have so many people that have given me opportunities, like yourselves. And the COVID happened, which did help a lot because everything went online. And it gave me the ability to finish my education while I was recovering. And it gave me the space that I needed.

Karen Shackleton: Yeah. And I mean, you're obviously a very resilient person.

Constance Johnson: Thank you.

Karen Shackleton: Brunna, I know that you've got a sister who lives with disability as well. So what are some of the challenges that you and your sister have had to face over the years?

Bruna Bauer: Challenge. I think Constance touched on content that was quite important, which is the importance of the family's support. So that's something that, as a family, we've always been very, very supportive. And of course, we've always, we had the privilege of having the resources to give her all the tools that she needs to live the very healthy life as well.

I think the main issue is when it comes to the external world. So especially when it comes to infrastructure. So because my sister, she's a wheelchair user. So that's the challenge, especially because I'm from Rio and Rio is very challenging in terms of infrastructure as a whole. But when it comes to being accessible for wheelchair users, it is a special challenge. But my sister, she came to visit me back in February here in Glasgow and visiting Glasgow. And although I do see, I used to see Glasgow as a very accessible city, once she was here, we start to have some very specific challenges.

So, for example, the city has an amazing infrastructure. So we were able just to walk around and go into restaurants and but, for example, we had a specific problem which was with glass on the streets. So her tyres got flat at least twice. So it's like small things, that it's just a little, an exercise of empathy that we can take care of and we can prevent you have these kind of problems, for example. So that was a very specific problem that I had here in Glasgow.

Karen Shackleton: Yes I remember you talking about it and finding somebody who just really helped you and didn't, it sort of inspires you about the human race when people do things like that.

Bruna Bauer: Yeah, exactly.

Karen Shackleton: Constance, what does best practise look like for an employer? But from your perspective, for employing a disabled person?

Constance Johnson: I think the simple and the most basic answer is being understanding and being able to be open and honest. And I've been very lucky with both of you in the interview process that you would just take it in and understand what I was saying and not putting pressure on me in ways that I can't, you know, I can't really do.

And working from home is a massive thing in my opinion. Being able to be in my own space, I can control my, my temperature, I can drink enough water, I can do all the things I need to and I can give you my best version of myself and my hardest work. Because I don't have to worry about travelling. If I start to feel unwell at work it doesn't matter because I'm at home and I can go and sit down if I need to. Whereas if I was in an office, you know, half an hour away from home, I'd have to think about getting on a train and worrying about that. So it gives you the ability to, it takes away the gap that you have between an able-bodied person, which I think is the most important thing. But if I could say one thing that I would love to see a big change in, is people's ability to speak about it. I think a lot of people find it a difficult subject, Disabled people and able-bodied people.

You know, I'm lucky I am in a family that are very understanding and very open about things. But there has been difficult conversations that I've had where people are not necessarily receptive to certain things, especially with friends or workplaces in the past. You have to be, sometimes you feel like you're the only one, going out there where you need it to be a two-way conversation. So I've been very lucky with everyone at Pensions for Purpose so far, has been so friendly with me. And so, you know, almost not making a big deal, which can be a thing, you can either have you can have people making a fuss and making it something that's scary when it's your life and it's not something that I worry about.

Karen Shackleton: Brilliant, brilliant. Now, this is quite a difficult question for you to answer, given that you're right at the beginning of your internship and don't know much about pension funds. But pension funds, obviously, they deal with investment managers and investment consultants who are advising them about their investments. What sort of questions do you think pension funds should be putting to their asset managers and consultants about disability, both in terms of asking questions about how they treat disability in their own organisations, but also how they think about disability in their investment companies, that they invest in? And can you think of any, any questions that they should be asking?

Constance Johnson: I think the most basic question is like how many disabled people do you work with, do you have in your teams or external teams? And how happy are they? As a simple question, you know, how fulfilled do they feel in their work? Do they feel that they're getting the most out of it? And also do their managers feel that they're getting the most out of them? Because it's a two way street. We need to be able to fulfil our work to the best of our abilities, but also have a life outside of, at home, and understand that there's so many different variables going on all the time.

And I think it would be important to ask about policies and, you know, making sure that they're flexible. You know, I am someone with an invisible disability. You wouldn't know if I hadn't told you. But also making sure that there's people that are needing other things. But it's a conversation with that person; not a you're disabled, one-size-fits-all, because that doesn't work for disabled people.

Karen Shackleton: Of course, Bruna, anything that you can think of to add to that?

Bruna Bauer: Yeah, I think a very interesting conclusion that we've got from the DE&I report is that we need, we need to find a balance between what is quantifiable, and diversity is quantifiable, so how many disabled people are working in your, in your company, in your organisation? But I think we also need to find ways to, to understand whether those places are inclusive or not. And if those people, they feel that they are part of the organisation and if they, they having it, they all need to respect it as well, and if they feel that they do have the space to grow in the company as an employee, as everybody else. So I think it's really finding the balance. OK, we do have a policy and we want to have 'x' employees, disabled employees, but do we have the infrastructure to receive those people? And if not, what can we do to improve the infrastructure, for example.

Karen Shackleton: Constance, can you tell us a little bit about Disability Pride Month? Because when you started talking to me about it, I had to look it up. So just tell us a little bit, what is it?

Constance Johnson: So it's a whole month dedicated to disabled people. And it's particularly making sure that we take pride as people and who we are, but also making sure that this is a conversation that's ongoing and we're addressing ableism in every walk of life.

It's in July because there was policies made in July for disabled people. There's lots of, lots of research to be done on it. And I think it's a very important thing, that we do have months like this. So we can have these conversations and that everyone's talking about it and everyone's thinking about it at the same time, because it really allows us to make change and make people feel comfortable, which I think is the most important thing.

Karen Shackleton: So what can our members do to support Disability Pride Month? Is there anything that you you'd ask them to?

Constance Johnson: You know, just talk just, you know, if you know someone disabled, reach out to them. And obviously we have to be polite, but ask a question. Is there anything that I should be doing for you? Or is there anything, you know, social media is a big thing now, sharing things on social media, getting that visibility. But I think the core of it is just conversations and breaking down stereotypes, and learning. You know, there's always room to learn from people and, you know, learn about different conditions. I never knew about my own conditions until I got them and neither did my family. I don't think, I remember I mentioned it to you, Karen, in my interview, and you said "I've never heard of that". It's quite common that it is. So teaching people about things and being open to people and keeping that door open for people to communicate with you.

Karen Shackleton: Yeah, absolutely. Final question, what was it that attracted you to the role of Pensions for Purpose, the internship? And then the second question, linking on to that, you've been through our interview process, so what advice would you give other disabled young people who are perhaps in similar positions applying for jobs at the moment?

Constance Johnson: So the first question, um, what attracted me was two different sides of it.

One was that you guys are a remote organisation, which is important for me, being able to, you know, not have to worry about things.

Also when I was scouring through your website, there was stuff about being disability confident and seeing stuff about that. That being mentioned makes you instantly think that you feel safe with these people, that they understand your research, you know, being focused on, you know, different types of people. I think that's important as well. It makes me feel safe and also I really want to make a difference and that's what you guys do. So being able to have a job where you do make a difference, that was something I was really passionate about and that's why, I knew, as soon as I saw it, I needed to apply.

Karen Shackleton: And advice for other young people?

Constance Johnson: For young people, I think don't be embarrassed is the first thing. You know, if you need to have a conversation with someone that there's certain things that you struggle with, however embarrassing you find it, you can do it and don't find, you don't think that you're any different just because of your disability. You're the same as everyone else. You just have different struggles. Everyone has struggles.

Just keep going. If doesn't work the first time, it will work the second time. You know, don't let anyone tell you can't do anything.

Karen Shackleton: Absolutely hear, hear.

It's estimated by the World Bank that 15% of the world's population have a disability, which is a far higher number than I would have said if you'd asked me without knowing that statistic. And in the UK, the figure is estimated, by the BBC, to be one in five.

Our recent research into diversity equity and inclusion, as Bruna mentioned earlier, has highlighted that pension funds need to focus more on DE&I in their underlying investments. So I've got a call to action to pension funds. Why don't you ask your asset management about their engagement on disability within the companies in which they invest through the month of July and onwards after that as well. Let's make this a more inclusive world for everyone!

Bruna, Constance, thank you ever so much. Really interesting conversation and thank you everybody for listening. Bye bye.