



## **Interview with Simon Holt, Elsevier Enabled**

**For podcast release  
Monday, December 2, 2019**

KENNEALLY: Publishing has long approached visual disabilities as an opportunity, at least for its products. Over many decades, publishers have created special editions of books and other texts in Braille and in large print. The proliferation of audio books, too, means even greater access to information and entertainment for the visually impaired. Access to jobs in publishing for the disabled, though, is another matter.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series, I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. December 3rd is observed as International Day of Persons with Disabilities, an occasion first proclaimed by the United Nations in 1992. One in six people around the world have some kind of disability. The impact on their lives is considerable. In the US and the UK, employment among people with disabilities is 30% lower than for the rest of the population.

Though publishing has made strides in opening its ranks to greater diversity, the industry still struggles with inclusion for people with disabilities. At Elsevier, Simon Holt, a senior acquisitions editor, is chair of Elsevier Enabled, a company-wide initiative to promote an accessible workplace and to highlight best practices for creating an inclusive professional culture. Simon Holt joins me now from Oxford in the United Kingdom. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Simon.

HOLT: Thanks very much for having me on the show. It's really great to be here.

KENNEALLY: We are looking forward to learning more about your work at Elsevier, and this project called Elsevier Enabled. And I guess the place to start is about the importance of this work. It's important because it's fair, it's the right thing to do, but there are other reasons that Elsevier and other publishers are stepping up to be more inclusive.

HOLT: Yeah, absolutely. I think, as publishers, we have a responsibility to our customers. We are the gatekeepers and if we aren't a diverse set of people, we're not going to be able to publish diverse perspectives, and we're not going to be aware of the challenges that face our readers, including, of course, accessibility. So I think it's really important that we make sure that we match the offering that we have for our customers, actually, to best practices in the area of accessibility and access to the industry within our companies and organizations, as well.



KENNEALLY: And the work that you are doing at Elsevier Enabled is professional, but it's also personal. Can you tell us about your story?

HOLT: Yeah, of course. So I'm visually impaired. I've been visually impaired since birth, and obviously through childhood, like a lot of people, books were very important to me, and access to books in large print and audio and what have you were also very important to me. I guess I was sheltered quite a bit in education because the education sector is quite good at making provision for differently abled people. When I got into the world of work, I realized that it was kind of different. I found the publishing industry to be a place where people were super wanting to help but not really knowing how to help. I'd go to interviews and I'd get some inappropriate questions, and I thought, well, if I ever get to a position where I can change things, then I'm going to try and do that, so in the future when people come for an interview the manager will see somebody who's resilient, resourceful, and good at problem solving and good at building relationships, etc., as a result of having a disability, as opposed to just seeing limitations and problems.

In the UK a couple of years ago, we had the government's Gender Pay Gap Analysis, and that really opened up different voices in terms of both disability and inclusion. I felt that it was really important that disability had a seat at the table alongside gender and race and LGBT. So therefore, that's why I decided that it would be a good thing to start a disability employee group which I did about 18 months ago, and we now have about 60 members around the world, some of which have disabilities themselves, some of which have family members or friends who have disabilities, and some people just want to learn more about disability inclusion. So our aims are to raise the profile of disability issues, to educate people on how to work best with people with different types of disabilities, and then also to inform the company about policy changes and innovations that they could make to make it a more inclusive and disability-confident place to work.

KENNEALLY: And so those are the objectives of Elsevier Enabled. You are working to identify possible solutions that people can implement at the company and perhaps beyond Elsevier. As you said, people want to help, people want to be supportive, but sometimes they don't know some of the right things to do, the technologies that are possible. Tell us about that. Tell us about some of the best practices and the possible solutions that exist today.

HOLT: Yeah, of course. I think the first thing to say is kind of the obvious one. This is about an attitude, rather than having loads of money. Clearly there are technological solutions you can put in place. So, for example, within the publishing industry, Elsevier has an accessibility commitment, which means our products are accessible. I see that Taylor & Francis have a new audio feature for



their online eBooks, which is great, as well. I know the Accessible Books Consortium do quite a lot of work, as well.

But actually, it really comes down to more a day to day level. So for example, in a job interview, instead of asking, you're visually impaired, does that mean you can't read, the thing to say is the job involves quite a lot of proofreading, how would you approach that? Because that's treating people with a disability on the same level as everybody else. I actually think this is about engagement and it's about having policies in place. So it's about saying if you're at work and you have a disability, great, these are the people you can go to, this is how you can get help. If you're applying for a job and you have a disability, this is what the process is going to be. There's no magic bullet as in if you sign up to this organization or if you just put these three things in place, all your problems will go away. But actually it's about dealing with individuals on a human being level and saying that actually if problems arise, if situations arise, we have policies in place that can help people, where people can go and make sure that your staff have unconscious bias training, there's free options available on the Internet, that kind of thing. Meaning that people are better equipped to tackle these challenges.

KENNEALLY: It strikes me the point you're making, that this is not a technology problem, this is a problem that people can approach just by being more thoughtful and thinking through how they might want to be treated themselves, and how best to be inclusive. It's not, as you say, any particular application that's going to change everything. It's an approach to doing the work.

HOLT: Yeah, and I think the one has to follow the other. So as I said, there are technological solutions out there, and I think things like automated closed-captioning, for example, with all subtitling to you and I for hearing impaired people or the opposite, automated voice technology, so text to speech technology, but it's not a catch-all solution. And actually as an organization, it's not simply about saying we'll purchase some software, so everything should be fine. Actually whatever the technological solutions are, they might be different for each person. But it's more about saying, OK, what's the problem here? What could the solutions be? And actually working with individuals to find solutions to suit them. I think that a lot of companies fall into the trap of saying, let's throw a load of money at a problem and it will go away. Actually, it's a lot more about speaking with individuals and actually, as I said, just knowing the right language to use so that you're dealing with and speaking with people as partners, as opposed to patronizing them or talking down to somebody because they're facing a particular challenge.

KENNEALLY: And this is work that you've been engaged with at Elsevier, through Elsevier Enabled, but you are also working with colleagues at Springer, at Wiley, at



Cambridge University Press to organize a publishing industry disability forum. So why do you think this needs to be an industry-wide initiative?

HOLT: Well, I think disability and inclusion in general is not a competitive sport. This isn't about saying well, Elsevier are doing this, and therefore we're much better than Taylor & Francis or CUP or any of these things. That's not what it's about. I think what we need to do is first of all think that as an industry people move around quite a bit, so therefore it's quite important that they have the same opportunity as everybody else wherever they go. But also actually it's about the reputation the publishing industry has as a whole. So I'm thinking now in terms of our readers, our customers, the people that interact with us as an industry. Actually what we want to be able to do is think about not just fine, some companies have some solutions that we can share best practice, but also recognizing that if you think about the publishing industry, probably about 85% of them are small publishers, society publishers, who don't have big HR departments or big technology departments or big groups of people that can come together. Actually part of the work we're doing in terms of the publishing industry working group on disability is actually helping to empower other people at their own companies to know how to have conversations, to be able to empower them to create cultural change where they work. Because the thing about disability, you mentioned some employment statistics at the start, it can be quite a lonely place. You might be the only person at your company with a disability. Therefore, actually, if we're competitive about this and we just think about our own companies, actually we're excluding a lot of people simply by not reaching out. If we think about the ethos of inclusion and the ethos of being disability-confident and being sure that everybody has an equal shot, not just to get to the start line, but to fulfill their own potential, it would actually be wrong to treat this in a company or competitive way. We need to think about this as a whole industry from a all-publishing point of view.

KENNEALLY: And this week, December 3rd, as the world observes International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the theme for this year is, The Future is Accessible. Share with us the link to your work there with this particular observance, and your thoughts on that theme – The Future is Accessible.

HOLT: Well, I think we've already covered the technological part of it. Clearly, as the world of publishing moves more towards electronic publishing and eBooks, as opposed to print, it's a lot easier to think about standards and adopt standards and think about different file formats and technological solutions, such as, as I said, automated audio that make books a lot more accessible than they were 20 years ago, where you might have had to get things out with a large print library and the selection wasn't very good. If we think about things like audio books, actually they are a medium that have allowed people with disabilities to access books maybe the first time, but actually just a great way for anybody to access books.



So I think from a book publishing point of view, *The Future is Accessible* leads quite nicely. But also I'd say from a personnel point of view, actually we're working in an increasingly competitive labor market, a globalized labor market. If we want to be getting the best and the brightest, why would you exclude 15% of the global population? Why would you exclude 30% of the workforce, as you talked about before? Actually technology companies like Google talk a lot about bringing your whole self to work, and actually bringing your whole self to work means this kind of thing, as well. So I'd say it's quite important from a personnel point of view.

In terms of Elsevier and the International Day of Disabilities, we're hosting an event this year with our CEO and a couple of outside speakers who are going to give talks. This is very good. We haven't done anything like this before. The reason it's good is simply from a raising awareness point of view. Elsevier's mantra, in whatever we do, is leading the way, and I'm actually really proud to work for an organization that's taking this kind of thing seriously. So for example, we have the accessibility commitment, we have dedicated UX people work on accessibility. Our CEO is the sponsor for accessibility within the organization. This is something we take really seriously and I'm really pleased to see that other publishers are starting to think about this as well, because I think not only is this the right thing to do, actually if we think about accessibility and disability inclusion, we're actually thinking about a big, untapped market. If you can get people accessing your content who weren't otherwise able to access your content, or you can get people applying for jobs in your organization who aren't being given a chance elsewhere, actually you're getting a lot of very talented people, you're getting a lot of extra readers that you wouldn't get before. And that all means that you're more likely to be successful as an organization than you would be if you weren't being actively inclusive in this way.

**KENNEALLY:** Simon Holt, a senior acquisitions editor and chair of Elsevier Enabled. Thanks for sharing your perspective and for joining us today on Beyond the Book.

**HOLT:** It was a pleasure, thanks very much for having me. Really appreciate that.

**KENNEALLY:** Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at [Beyondthebook.com](http://Beyondthebook.com). I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC's Beyond the Book.

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