[Music]

Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to GWSB Proud, a podcast all about why are you proud of GWSB? My name is Liesl Riddle, and I am the Associate Dean for Graduate Programs here at the George Washington University School of Business. And I have the great pleasure of sitting down with GW alumni, faculty, staff and students to hear why they are GWSB Proud.

Welcome to the podcast today here on GWSBProud! I am so fortunate to be joined here in the podcast studio with Dr. Megan Lawrence, who is the Senior Accessibility Evangelist at Microsoft.

Welcome, Megan, so good to see you today!

Megan Lawrence:

Yes, thank you so much for having me.

Riddle:

Well, Megan, I love the title, Senior Accessibility Evangelist. You are here to evangelize for me!

Take us back -- I mean -- when you were a little girl did you decide, “I’m going to be an accessibility evangelist? Did you always know this is what you wanted to do? What’s the back story?

Megan Lawrence:

I have to admit I had no idea what an evangelist was. Even when I applied for the role. So, no, I did not grow up thinking I was going to be an evangelist. No, not at all. In fact, you know, I was one of those children that grew up in the mountains, in the woods. We were very close to the Giant Sequoia National Forest. So, I always wanted to be a geographer. So, I actually have a PhD in geography from the University of Oregon, where I was focused on blind and low vision navigation and geospatial tool development and how we were going to create great spatial inclusion technology for people who were blind or low vision.

Riddle:

I see. I see. So, how did you get from geography to Microsoft?

Megan Lawrence:

I know! It seems like a large leap, but, in reality, I was a research scientist in San Francisco and was focusing on working with people with disabilities, and we would build these pilots and do this research and folks would say, “Megan, you know, I love the creative thinking, but can't you just make the technology that I use every day more accessible? So, I realized there was a huge opportunity to make that giant leap from academia to the technology world, so that we could begin to really think about the way that we provide access for the one in five people that

have a disability.

Riddle:

Well, what is it about Microsoft that you enjoy? Why do you like working on this team?

Megan Lawrence:

So, I joined Jenny Lay-Flurrie, who is our chief accessibility office, about five years ago when we really, you know, hit refresh, and we were rebooting our accessibility program and bringing together the disability inclusion and the people with disabilities at Microsoft together with our engineering excellence. You’ll laugh at this, but we were literally talking last night. She said, “You know when I hired you as an evangelist, it was a grand experiment. She goes, “I didn't really know what we were going to do!”

So, you know, it's been -- it's been hard. It’s been fun. I mean, we literally were building this plane, you know, while we were we were flying it in some senses.

But now as I look at my role, I think of myself as an evangelist. I’m almost like a futurist, which is, you know, always looking at what's coming next. How do we plant the seeds that we need now to make sure that we've got the innovation that we need for, you know, tomorrow? And, so given the pandemic, and the rise that we're beginning to see with people with mental health conditions, in fact, my role is changing a little bit and continuing to follow those trends and focus very specifically on technology and people with mental health disabilities.

Riddle:

Well, that brings me to an important question about what role business schools should be playing in all this, which is one of the reasons why I was so excited to have you here as my guest, so that we can learn from you. As, you know, the School of Business at the George Washington University is very committed to diversity, equity and inclusion. And when we think about and frame up our ideas around that people with disabilities are definitely a part of that, it's

just another one of those intersectionality kinds of identities that we need to be thinking about as a business school. So, in your mind, Megan, what kinds of things do business schools need to be doing in this area above and beyond, obviously, meeting the requirements of ADA and, you

know, accommodating?

Megan Lawrence:

Yeah, you know, I think the real golden opportunity is around instruction. You know, there are over a billion people in the world with disabilities, and you know, the good news is if you don't have a disability yet, don't worry you will, because all of us will experience, you know, a disability on a permanent temporary or a situational basis. And so it's really about teaching students the skills about how do you build an accessibility program, how do you create those processes to make sure that you're meeting the needs not only of employees in your, you know, company, but really the customers, so I think we've often thought that accessibility was a technical discipline right this is something we would teach in computer science or engineering how you make the tool, but I think that really our next generation of business leaders, which are right now in your courses. They’re going to set the mission, the vision, the values for our companies in the future, and we want to see accessibility and disability inclusion at the heart of that.

Riddle:

So, if you were going to speak to one of those managers of today and tomorrow right now, what kinds of things would you want to encourage them to think about or research or pay attention to?

Megan Lawrence:

Yeah, so the data is clear on this one. Accenture put out some research that shows companies that hire people with disabilities make 28% higher revenue on average. Right? I mean, this is an important business decision to make. So, you know the way that I see our business leader of the future is creating not only the culture of inclusion in which people are going to thrive, which is absolutely critical, because you want to hire, retain, and promote that great disability talent. But technology companies like Microsoft really provide the technology that’s the backbone that helps modern organizations achieve those goals.

Riddle:

So, I’m going to take this sort of another step further. I mean, as I mentioned, the school is really thinking very carefully about how to promote diversity, equity and inclusion. By business schools doing that and focusing on those with disabilities as a part of that entire framing and equation, how does that help Microsoft achieve its goals?

Megan Lawrence:

Well, I’ll be very clear, we have a robust inclusive hiring program, and we are looking for great disability talent. And part of what we see is that there is a lack of talent in the pipeline today and so, you know, we are so encouraged to be partnering with universities such as yourself to really think about how we provide great, accessible education that then translates into jobs, you know, in the modern world. But, you know, when I was getting ready for this podcast, I went back to some research that Microsoft had done about Generation Z, which are your students in the classroom today and younger. And what we found were two really top topics. One was about students – saying look, it’s a mindset not a skillset. I might not have the exact degree that you are looking for, but I am skilled and I can learn and I’m flexible. The second piece that we heard is that they expect companies to have mental health programs and that managers are managing emotional relationships on teams. That’s very different from the kind of management skills that I think we have traditionally taught or even the way that we thought about what it means to create an inclusive company.

Riddle:

Yeah, you know, I think it completely changes, I think, the way we have to prepare people to be future employees but also the way that we them to think about being managers as well.

You’ve done so many different things at Microsoft. I’m wondering if you could share some anecdotes about some of the things that you're most proud of that you've been able to do

there.

Megan Lawrence:

Oh my gosh! How long do we have, Liesl? I think you know to me there are several, you know, components to this. One is that we recognized that we wanted to run accessibility like any other business, right? We’re not doing this just because it is the right thing to do. We’re doing this to empower people with disabilities to change societal inclusion and build innovative, cool technology using inclusive design principles. So, we’ve come out with the Microsoft evolution model, which really shows what are the things that we are measuring, how are we really thinking about maturity over time. And to me, I think that’s been one of the most important pieces of work because we’ve really evaluated ourselves every quarter. We go ahead and look at ourselves and report back to our SLT members. So, to me, that’s critical because it’s both the people in the organizations and the hiring practices we’ve put into place. It’s the technology and making sure that it’s accessible, it’s procuring and buying technology that is accessible, so we’re creating an ecosystem, so it’s multifaceted in a kind of classic maturity model form.

Riddle:

When you think about the things that you’d like to see faculty researching in this area…Right now, so much of what we actually teach in the classroom comes from the types of research that our faculty are doing. How can our faculty learn from these great successes from Microsoft? How can they add value to business schools and help shape management of the future by researching issues related to inclusion of those with different abilities?

Megan Lawrence:

Yeah, I mean, I think for a long time there's been this desire – I can't tell you how many times I've heard, “what's the business case for accessibility? We know it's the right thing to do, but where's the number, right? And to be honest with you, Accenture was really the first report that came out that really was able to draw that conclusive and, you know, data-driven research that shows disability inclusion is actually important for the bottom line. It’s the way you deliver to your shareholders, and so, I think we need more research into not only how do we teach these topics within business schools within, you know, HR departments that I know that you have there at GW, but also drawing that connection back and saying, “What’s the real business value that comes from always purchasing accessible technology that supports larger inclusion? There’s a lot of room for growth there.

Riddle:

Absolutely! Well, and Microsoft, too, also becomes involved in helping organizations, right, making sure that they are accessible. Can you talk a little bit about that particular process? We’re very fortunate at the School of Business to be partnering with Microsoft on our own assessment of how digitally accessible we are as an organization. We take that very, very seriously, and are looking forward to going through that assessment process. But can you speak to that, you know, more broadly for the audience?

Megan Lawrence:

Yeah, and this is actually some of my favorite parts of my job is that I work very, very closely with customers. So oftentimes, you know, in the beginning, it’s really about uncovering and discovering the accessibility that’s built into our products. Oftentimes I hear things like, “I didn’t know that there! Immersive reader allows me to change my background color to have information read aloud to me. And nobody else will see that except for me because it's how I customize my document?” Right? That’s just an example. So, it usually starts with that discovery phase and then quickly it becomes well, how do we actually build a sustainable program, so that accessibility becomes part of our culture, because that’s when the magic happens, right?

So, just as an example, every year, we have a giant hackathon at Microsoft. It’s called

One Week, and this drives so much amazing innovation. When you have the disabled community together with our engineers really hacking on what’s next – how do we push the boundaries of what’s possible and so, you know, engaging customers in these kinds of activities, it’s just incredibly fun!

Riddle:

Wow! That sounds really, really great! When does that take place?

Megan Lawrence:

It’s in the summer months. Of course, I don’t know exactly what the date is for this year, but we do often partner with customers, so maybe that’s a great opportunity for us to think about HACK!

Riddle:

Well, that sounds great! You know, I am so grateful that we’ve been able to have this conversation today, Megan. You know, I have to give a shout out to GWSB alumnus, Mike Richardson, who works at Microsoft, and who is our Dean’s Corporate Council member for Microsoft, and who is my former student who introduced the two of us because I think it’s a great part of, you know, this podcast called GWSBProud. We usually end the broadcast with asking, you know, what are we really proud about being part of GW as a community and the School of Business in particular. And I have to say, this is a really proud moment where a student, who, you know, has come to help the school has made that connection, you know, beyond just meeting the students and advising them. He gives so much of his time to do stuff like that but to move beyond that to help make the institution even better by connecting us with you and other experts at Microsoft, so that we can do a better job of “walking the talk” of diversity, equity and inclusion. We have a lot to learn, so thank you for sharing your expertise with us today.

Megan Lawrence:

Oh, absolutely. And, you know, I have to say that I’m incredibly proud to be able to partner with you on the topic of accessibility. I mean this is one of those moments where you know through partnership we really can move the needle and we can’t do it alone as Microsoft. It is the collection of universities and companies together that are going to create real change. So, I’m equally as proud to be working with you, so thank you for having me!

Riddle:

Well, I look forward to the things that we can do together and getting other business schools involved because, as you rightly point out, business schools should be at the forefront of this movement as we are the institutions that kind of bridge that divide between talent and the employer, and so who better to do that and to take that leadership role? So we’re happy to that with you.

Thanks again, Megan.

Megan Lawrence:

Oh, thank you.

Riddle:

That's all for this episode. Thanks for listening today. Shout out for music credit to Plantain Papi, also known as Michael Ferrier, GW class of 2020. See you next time to learn more ways we are GWSB Proud.

[Music]