

Explorable | Season One, Episode Four: Transcript of interview with Joanna Hunt

Josh: We couldn't be more thrilled to have an amazing guest with us today. But before we introduce everybody just a quick check in with Toby. Toby... how are you doing today?

Toby: I'm doing all right Josh. Thanks for asking. How about yourself?

Josh: Hey I am doing fabulous today and without any further hold up let's just introduce our guest: Joanna Hunt. Joanna is the manager of Kindle accessibility at Amazon. She is a technical product leader advocating for the development of fully inclusive experiences and changing the technological landscape for people with disabilities. Joanna, hey, and welcome to exploreable.

Joanna: Hey! Thanks Josh. Thanks Toby! it's great to be with you guys today.

Josh: Joanna, if you could just take a quick few minutes and tell us a little bit more about what you do at Amazon and how you make Kindle more accessible.

Joanna: Sure absolutely. So I lead a pretty rockstar team of cross-functional people who do all kinds of cool stuff, right. I mean we've got product managers and engineers and quality experts and even designers-- they are ridiculously passionate about making experiences that, you know, we got to delight them have built things that they enjoy using and that's really our goal is to build those devices for Kindle reading applications on our tablets on OSS or Android and even the Kindle for a P.C. experience so that they really are accessible to everybody.

And the progress that we've made towards that goal so far has really been focused on helping making reading more comfortable for people with vision impairments or other reading disabilities. And that might include things like making the font size bigger or changing the line space between the lines in your book so that it's easier to read. Controlling the brightness of the screen or the margins so that the lines are longer or shorter to help you focus and concentrate.

And that's also kind of what led into this most latest release that we put out which is a tool called Reading ruler. It's this really simple, but powerful, tool that mimics this idea of these physical reading aids that kids used to use in the classroom where you'd hold the ruler over a page of text and kind of move the ruler up and down on the screen in order to keep your focus and concentration and so earlier this year we released a digital equivalent of that for a kid on IOS where you can either move the ruler or move the book contact through the ruler if it's easier to keep the ruler itself fixed in place so that along with you know the voice you screen better that we've created man there's a lot of cool stuff going on with not just my team but all of the teams across Kindle -- it's really fun to be a part of.

Josh: that all sounds great. And, real quick, Toby, I'm just going to give a quick consideration for our listeners. You know the Explorable podcast really is about destinations and finding out how "explorable" they are. But this conversation we're having today about the Amazon Kindle and accessibility with it really ties into travel and tourism because we can think of not only those things that we want to pack and our our suitcase or even simply for on a commute from point A to Point B for our work everyday or we're just at home right now in the cove it era thinking about exploring new places once all of this pandemic goes away. The Kindle reader is one of the most amazing technical technological inventions to allow so many people to get back into reading and to be excited about reading no matter where they are.

Toby: Yeah I agree. Josh, this is about the end to end travel experience and that includes, you know, one thing that I love to do is read a book on a train. I love train travel going between cities or overnight trips. Having a good book is imperative.

And how many people you know love to sit on the beach and read a book and as you pointed out Josh, right now during quarantine we're probably sitting home dreaming about travel and perfect time to read a book about our favorite destination or somewhere we dream about going and join I always get the warm and fuzzy questions it seems like. But I'm wondering about your personal experience with disability and, if you don't mind sharing your story, and how that shows up at Amazon with your experience and your passion for inclusion and how that influences your work.

Joanna: Well I really started working to solve technology problems for people with disabilities. Back around 2008 or so... long before I joined Amazon... back then it was this entirely new space for me. I really didn't know very much about it. So I started to talk to customers about how they used assistive technology. Like what assistive technology was how it helped people experience digital environments more easily.

And I really just sort of wanted to dive into this interesting and meaty and complex problem which I kind of really liked to solve. I loved taking on those what seemed like really difficult wicked problems and a few months after I started doing this research my nephew who was 4 years old at the time was diagnosed with a pretty severe case of ADHD and an oppositional defiant disorder. He lived in this really small town in Canada where they didn't really have the knowledge, the resources or even the experience to help him out in school and he struggled a lot.

People just didn't understand the different way that his brain works and as an aunt who wanted so badly for this kid to succeed it sort of bothered me to no end that he was facing these barriers that didn't make any sense in school. And then a few months after that I met this woman who was a lawyer at the Department of Labor in Washington DC and we met at a networking event arranged by a different friend and she actually became one of my best friends.

But what surprised me about the way that she had chosen to live her life was that she never wanted her deafness to define her. She never wanted that to be something that made people

question her capabilities and so at a very early age she learned how to speak without a deaf speech accent. She could read lips fluently. You would never know she was deaf unless she actually chose to tell you that and she had literally no functional hearing at all and she was just this incredibly wonderful woman.

And then shortly after that I was at my rock climbing gym and I met this guy who had been injured in the war. He was a single arm amputee and could climb anything and blew my mind and he became one of my most influential climbing instructors and all of a sudden this technical problem wasn't so like a problem for me anymore.

It was like this thing that said Oh my God there are these amazing wonderful people who are facing ridiculous brick walls in life that the rest of us have erected and I got really passionate about trying to bust it and break it down and can tell when the opportunity came up to join Canada. Well it just made all the sense in the world because I lived in that same small town in the middle of nowhere. When I was growing up and reading was my escape. It was the thing that I did all the time and it astounded me that there were people who didn't have access to books because technology should be opening doors and instead it was kind of keeping people out and I wanted to go fix that. And so that's what we did. I'm super excited about it.

Josh: That's great that's great. So this is just kind of a fun question: what's your go to book genre when it comes to what is on your Kindle right now. Oh God I don't even know if I could pick one. Seriously, books are just something I love.

Joanna: Right now I'm rereading one of my most favorite historical historical romance science fiction Mash Up series called Outlander that I've been reading for years and years and I'm rereading it for like probably the 18th time right now but I just love it all. What I love about Kindle especially for travel is that I can just take all my books with me so if I'm in the mood for a science fiction novel I have one if I'm in the mood for a romance I have one if I'm in the mood for a biography of some historical figure I have one where I can find one.

And the fact that I can carry all those books around with me is just just amazing. Like I'm sure you're both incredibly aware but like it can be really difficult for people with disabilities to get their hands on a new book especially a new release book right. Like they're not printed in large print. They're not printed in Braille. And if you are lucky enough to get your hands on one they're huge and they're heavy and you want to take that with you when you travel. And so that's one of the things that just makes me so proud of the work we do. All right.

Like we have 12 million screen reader supported books. And when you Perrier Kindle or your Kindle app on IAW or android with a braille display all of a sudden you have 12 million books in Braille that you can carry with you on your Kindle and you can read and it's just so cool to be able to do that kind of stuff and I love hearing from our customers who are using it and telling us that it's great but it could be better because that just makes us work harder and it's awesome.

Toby: Hey Joanna, you know it seems like accessibility is becoming more and more mainstream and I'd love to hear your thoughts on how you see society changing? And also, in your time at Amazon how has the thinking changed around from a product perspective on accessibility and Disability Inclusion? Now I think you said it really well it's becoming more mainstream.

Joanna: I think overall the technology industry really actually has started to focus a lot more on inclusion and accessibility. Twelve years ago when I started doing this kind of thing most people wouldn't have even known what a screen-reader was. Heck-- I didn't. And now I think teams are really starting to shift their mindset. And think about accessibility really as just another aspect of good quality software design right. It's just a good experience when you make it accessible. And the Kindle teams I think are working really hard to build experiences that do just that -- working on those devices and reading applications that work with that assistive technology, that support all different kinds of reading needs and the diversity that exists within that but not even that we can help people become authors and all of the tools and technology that you can use to be an author on Kindle. We focus on making that accessible so there's no barriers to anybody who wants to publish a book.

So you know there's just so many cool things going on there and, you know, I can't really speak to the whole of Amazon... but what I have seen is that there are so many groups just like Kindle where accessibility has become this high priority and for us for our teams that can know it really as a core part of our development process. One of my favorite experiences, to be honest, that I observed at the NSP convention a couple of years ago was I think we were I think oh I don't remember where we were I think we were in Orlando or something.

But the thing that blew my mind around the differences that have happened in the last 12 years was that this little boy-- I think he must have been like eleven. He just ran up to the Amazon booth where we were shown muffin and just expected it to work like there was no question about how accessible this was. He just picked it up, picked up a Kindle, picked up a fire tablet, turned it on.

Figured out how to turn on a screen reader and just expected it to work! Boom, just like that! Twelve years ago there never would have been that expectation-- it would have been like, Oh that sounds cool... but will it work for me? And there would have been this little like fear that that wasn't possible and that's gone now.

And here's what that means-- that we're doing things right. We're creating experiences that people just expect. That the Kindle will work as it should. And we're delivering on that. And I love it.

Toby: Yeah I really appreciate it as a user. And I think inclusive design is good design-- and for our listeners who don't know there's well over a billion people in the world with disabilities. So this is not only good design for all users it's a substantial market that businesses want to capture

and so it's a win win win. If you excuse the cliché but I think it's a good thing that society is starting to recognize not only the responsibility but the opportunity.

Joanna: Absolutely. And so for our listeners just for clarification NFIB was the National Federation of the Blind Conference.

Josh: Yes I'm proud to be a federation member! So hi to all NFP listeners out there. But...I have a confession and I'm sorry to say this... I don't have a Kindle and it seems like every three months. Joanna I kind of consider it. And then back off and I'm going to be quite honest with you the reason that I hesitated really had to do with consideration for accessibility.

As a blind user I wasn't sure about if it would be you know something that was kind of just bolted on as an after fact but hearing everything that you're saying. I mean it sounds like Accessibility is baked in at the core. And so my question for you for those people that are still on the fence of considering a Kindle or maybe this is the first time they're hearing about these e-readers for somebody who has a disability or for a family member who's considering maybe the opportunity. What would you suggest for the next steps for them to take to be able to purchase one or to try it out?

Joanna: Yeah I mean a great place to start if you just want to learn a little bit more about what's going on is that Kindle accessibility page on Amazon.com so that you are all for that is Amazon.com slash Kindle accessibility. All one word.

And there's sort of an overview about all of the different things that are possible with Kindle and that you dive down into deeper information. But one of the other things is that Amazon takes a pretty non-standard approach when it comes to technology-- we believe fully in affordability, right. Like so you can go buy a fire tablet for like 50 bucks and you get access to those twelve million books plus all of our Prime Video catalogs. And you compare that with your braille display and it does work. It is baked into that.

The very beginnings of the sort of flagship e-reader Kindle vice. I'll be frank and say it's support for customers who rely on screen reader technology is maybe not as equal as its LCD counterparts today. And some of that is just because as I'm sure you guys are familiar a lot of the really powerful interactions on a mobile device require multi touch gestures where the screen can recognize the difference between one finger on the screen and two fingers on the screen the current.

Technologies don't actually tell the difference. You can't tell if there's one finger on the screen or two that the tech just doesn't do that well. So while it works and it works pretty well it's not quite as robust and powerful as something like the fire tablet or the reading applications that have sort of the full gamut of support for it for accessibility. You know what we've tried to focus on with all of the technology that Amazon builds is like making it as simple and straightforward and connected to how existing other things work right.

So with the Fire tablet for instance if you just hold the power button down the same way you would on any Android phone its first reaction is oh do you want to turn on the screen reader. Right. So you hold that down for a few seconds and then it pops up an audio message that says Do you want to turn on the screen reader and you can gesture your answer with a gesture about whether you do or you don't. So it's just that like right out of the box experience where we're trying to help you learn how to turn on that technology and give you guidance along the way.

And we do that with all of this stuff that we're building, right. I did mention that Website Kindle accessibility Amazon.com slash Kindle accessibility. We try to create a lot of connections there to some of the information about how to use our different features and you know Kindle. We pride ourselves on making sure that we're designing it to think about that whole spectrum of reading providing information about how you easily increase the text size.

Well, you can just zoom in on it in an e-reader device and make it bigger. In some cases maybe not on every device but that sort of device specific like most things are alright. There's nuances to how they work but the Kindle reader or sorry the reading rule or feature that I mentioned earlier is sort of another great example of something that's super easy to use. If you're holding your iPhone for instance in one hand you can set your Kindle book into a mode where you don't have to turn pages you just scroll it like a Web site right.

So it does vertically scrolls all the way through the content. And when you turn the ruler you can just with a single hand like stay focused keep your eye in one place so you don't get dizzy or distracted. Change the color and style of that little ruler to find something that helps you create the right blocked out experience that helps you focus if you have dyslexia or ADHD or something like that. And that ease of use only comes because we actually talk to people who have those challenges who are using those tools and learn what it is that makes them more comfortable how they're used to using technology.

So we can create similar and consistent patterns and you know my one of the things I love best about this work is the connection we have to those customers like we have. We got emails a few weeks ago from a mom who told me that her daughter who's blind loves books loves to read but flat out refused to use audio books or audio support for reading because she just wanted to be able to read on her own. She didn't want anybody else to have to read for her and wasn't aware that Kindle supported that kind of thing right where she could parrot to a braille display or she could increase the text size so she could exercise a little bit of functional vision. She still had and it was so cool to hear that Mom say now she loves to read again because we found Kindle.

I mean for me I think reading is like the core of creating a healthy society right. It helps us think creatively it helps us be innovative it helps us understand the world around us and gain more knowledge which just sort of expands the way we think about things but it also has measurably improves employment outcomes and scores for kids and you know economic stability in the world and there's just so many things about that that are important and connected to reading and the more we can do to provide access to reading either to make reading easier to

fundamentally make it accessible to people but also maybe create a lifelong reader out of somebody who traditionally has just found reading hard because of things that are beyond their control.

Josh: Amazing statement Joanna. You mentioned employment people with disabilities of course to an extent have certain challenges and issues when it comes to employment. So having this opportunity to be able to cultivate their skills from a reading standpoint is super phenomenal. If I'm not asking too much about kind of opening the door and peeking into your process does the Amazon Kindle accessibility team work with disability consultants? Are there people with disabilities that are at Amazon? What's the process when it comes to hearing about some of the challenges to optimize accessibility? Do you work internally with people with disabilities or externally or both?

Joanna: So we have a gentleman on our team -- his name is Jamal and he would tell you that he is a self-confessed video file. He loves books.

He and I get along really really well because of our love for books but he's also blind and he's a quality expert on our team and he brings this incredible unique perspective to everything that we're doing and trying to help us understand that space and what that means in relation to books and it's it's incredibly valuable to the whole team to have him with us on a daily basis. But even beyond that Amazon has an affinity group called People with disabilities Amazon people with disabilities.

And that group is focused on trying to just create a culture of awareness and an acceptance and all of those great things around employees at Amazon. But they you know they drive goals to to foster that community but they will also participate in user tests and beta programs and just like with what we're doing all we can do to them and say hey I'm looking for people who might have a certain challenge with reading if you're willing to talk to us we'd love to learn.

So we do a lot of that but we all are also connected to our customers on a regular basis at events like the National Federation of the blind conference or the American Foundation of the blind or see sign or accessing higher ground or closing the gap or you know all of the accessibility conferences. But we also seek people out in our regular daily lives as well. Like there's lots of things that you can learn from people who may not. Outwardly identify as having a disability right.

There's a ton of people who have what we might refer to as an invisible disability. So if you're just having a conversation about hey what makes reading hard you're going to learn a lot that's actually going to help level the playing field for a lot of different individuals and we actively seek out people to participate in research studies with us to join our teams like that type of diversity is a critical component to success for amazon so yes it's huge.

Toby: Hey Joanne I hope being that we're both in Seattle we can get a socially distanced coffee one that one of these days or hopefully not socially distant in the near future. Gosh I can't wait to

get out and go and travel again but for now I wonder for now I'm wondering how folks can get in touch with you if they want to connect or maybe you have more questions for you.

Joanna: Sure. So people with disabilities or some of my favorite people to talk to. I mean y'all are some of the most inventive and innovative people I've ever met. So I love connecting professionally with people in this community. The best way to do that with me directly is probably to find me then you can just search for my name and title at Amazon and it's pretty easy to find on LinkedIn. So happy to connect with anyone who's interested in staying in touch directly if you do have more specific feedback that you want to share about Kindle. You can also just email us at Kindle dash accessibility at Amazon dot com and we love to get those emails as well.

Josh: Great. All sounds great. Well... Joanna... Toby. This has been phenomenal! And to all folks at home -- This has been an Explorable podcast. Thank you so much to Brad and everybody listening.