



Samantha Osborne Role Model Profile

Internal Communications Officer

What is your role at Queen Mary? What do you do?

Internal Communications Officer (Marketing & Communications). I work mainly with staff comms, the most recognisable is probably the E-Bulletin, and work with departments on various comms projects throughout the year such as Brexit, EDI projects such as Black History Month, the PS staff conference amongst others.

What is your experience of being disabled at Queen Mary (or in your life more generally)?

When starting a new job, it isn't always easy to adapt but my colleagues have been great and really supportive. It's often difficult to have those conversations with colleagues and managers about having a disability because it can make you feel like you're a nuisance and you don't want them to draw negative conclusions about your abilities. I must confess it wasn't easy when I started at Queen Mary to talk about being disabled but my colleagues have really been encouraging by helping me to access to support - that's a big confidence boost and says something about the evolving culture of the institution.

How does Queen Mary support you?

I've had some really great line managers at Queen Mary who I've been able to have a discussion with about how best to get the support I need to do my job. My brain is wired differently from most people's so having that honest conversation with my colleagues is really helpful as quite a lot of it is about finding the most effective way to do my job as efficiently as possible. For example, I find it a lot easier to proofread/keep track on paper than on screen so it was helpful to be able to print things out. I get very tired very easily from hours of looking at a screen and that can cause my information overload!

It's really good to be involved in the conversation about how colleagues and the university can help me - to be able to give that input stops me from feeling isolated, frustrated and useless!

How could Queen Mary better support its disabled community?

I think that there should be clearer policies and procedures for disabled people, especially in helping us to gain access to reasonable adjustments right from being recruited for the role.

These adjustments aren't about giving us special treatment; one Department of Work and Pensions employee once told me, it's about 'levelling the playing field'. It's hard enough to do your job with a disability especially if it is hard to access the support you need.

It would be great to see a library of equipment available to borrow and try out on a trial basis so that we can figure out if it would be useful before committing to a purchase – simple things like mice or keyboards even. I'd also like to see that disabled people have a dedicated HR contact to speak to ahead of starting at Queen Mary so that any concerns can be dealt with ahead of time and it isn't a conversation that you're having with your manager who may not be aware or understand what you need.

Why do you want to be a disabled role model? Why do you think role models are important?

I think it is really important to destigmatize disability as not being 'unable', but highlighting that disabled people are 'differently abled'. I am actually dyspraxic and dyslexic so meeting me you wouldn't know that I have a disability on the surface. It's these hidden disabilities that no one really knows or understands that show that we need to be able to have honest, open conversations about disability. I was only diagnosed 4 years ago so I've had a fair few years being 'differently abled' but never really understanding why. I went through a whole series of anxieties upon diagnosis as I felt people would never take me seriously in my chosen career – after all I work in communications where spelling and grammar are fairly key.

I must say though that I've always wanted to write and have loved to read and write since an early age. This must be a strange thing for a dyslexic to say they want to do! I am glad that I persevered with it as I really do love it. Although some days can be enormously challenging and exhausting – my disability means that sometimes my brain just won't cooperate how I want it to, despite my best intentions – I still love what I do enormously.

What do you want staff and students at Queen Mary to know or understand about disability and the disabled community?

I would say that you should never give up on your dreams because of disability. Even though I work in an area which is enormously challenging at times, I still love it and don't regret my career choice at all. I also would say that if you're offered support or reasonable adjustments, you should definitely take those up. The whole point of those is to help you to be the best you can be. By taking the chance to level the playing field, it is amazing what you find out about yourself and your enormous strengths.

I learnt that being dyspraxic makes me think about things really differently. I did a Computer Science masters some time ago and although I don't code as much as I did, it really appealed to me as it helps me to look at whatever I'm doing in a methodical and creative way. My brain is wired differently from everyone else's and I have learnt it is ok to be that way – even encouraged! I used to be really frustrated on my MSc that I would come up with different solutions to our programming assignments but now I understand it, I'm thrilled to have been able to see things differently.

I was lucky enough to have some dyspraxia awareness training funded by the Department of Work and Pensions in my previous role. I've always thought I have an appalling memory but this training demonstrated to me that I'm a visual learner and I work better using visual reminders especially colour and texture to help me remember things – two years on, I can still remember all the items in

the test my trainer set me, including the most intricate details. If you'd given me a paper list of words, and even worse, a verbal list, I very much doubt this would be the case!

How can staff and students be a better ally to the disabled community?

I think one of the best conversations I've ever had with some colleagues are the ones where I'm honest about how my disability is affecting me on a particular day. It's ok to say that my brain is overloaded and I can't possibly have another meeting because I'm processing too much. If you don't tell people, especially when you have a hidden disability, they won't know.

I'd also say don't be quick to judge. I'm enormously clumsy and some days when I'm exhausted I might take the lift instead of the stairs, this isn't because I'm lazy, it's because I'm tired and I'm afraid of tripping and falling down the stairs (I've fallen off a very long escalator before and that's definitely an experience that I don't want to repeat!).

The other thing I'd say is if you know someone is disabled then let them tell you the best way you can support them. Too often I've had well-meaning people take over when my brain is still processing the information and I'm still working it out. This makes me feel inadequate and stupid!

Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences, life or work?

I am enormously clumsy and tend to bump into the furniture because of being dyspraxic. I realise now that it's ok and can laugh it off!

I think the world and workplace are much more accepting of people with disabilities now which is great, especially if you've got a hidden disability. There is so much more that can be done to support and help people – that support and help needs to be much easier to access though!