



Meet... Barry O'Donovan

Meet Barry, Senior Programme Manager in our Talent Management and Organisational Development team in the People Directorate, and Co-Chair of the Disability and Wellbeing Network (DaWN). Barry talks about his work on the redesign of our recruitment processes, what's important to him in a working environment, and what we can all do to champion equality, diversity and inclusion.

Tell us a bit about your current work:

I am currently on secondment from the Programme Delivery team to work on the redesign of our recruitment processes. I am so fortunate to bring my other role as a Co-Chair of the Disability and Wellbeing Network (DaWN) and some skills from my clinical background as a Psychotherapist into my role. I am gathering lived experience from colleagues and staff networks to bring inclusion into the process design. It is an honour to be trusted with such lived experience and to see that our organisation wants to use it wisely.

How does Disability Equality affect you?

I have physical (prostatitis, several problems with my left leg, inguinal hernia) and mental health (general anxiety disorder) long-term conditions. Being honest, I would prefer not to have these conditions and not talk about them very often. It has taken many years to accept my own limitations in certain circumstances and adapt my work and personal life to ensure I can live a full and enjoyable life.

It has felt a struggle at times to get reasonable adjustments in place and the need to have the same conversation many times with different colleagues and Occupational Health. I see my disability as an element of my life, as is my Irish background and being a gay man. If anyone remembers Toyah from the 1980s, "I want to be me... I want to be free" rather than boxed into a category. I later learned that Toyah was from a very well-to-do background and not the rebel spirit I imagined....

Why is Disability History Month important to you? What does it mean to you?

I think it is a great opportunity to talk about disability and build on the similarity and connections that exist across all colleagues. We are all impacted by long-term health conditions within our circle of loved ones. As humans, as we grow older, we generally acquire more health issues, many of which can be labelled as a disability, so it is likely to be something that impacts us all. For some reason there is stigma about disability and mental health conditions and if we all stopped putting on a brave face, keeping a stiff upper lip and letting people see all of us, I think work would be a nicer place. As an example, COVID-19 has allowed a lot of bonding and sharing of experiences between colleagues.

How would you describe to someone who doesn't know you, what it's like to be you?

I think my biggest challenge is pain management and fatigue with some medication side-effects added in. I compare myself to a 2 or 3-year-old mobile phone, the battery starts at 100% and yet runs down very quickly and may need to be recharged during the day. Sometimes this battery drain seems disconnected to actual usage so is unpredictable and catches even me by surprise. I try to have good self-care, but also want to do a good job, so I sometimes push myself too far!

What's important to you, in a working environment?

I think COVID-19 has led to a shared experience which can connect everyone. Some of the common themes of working from home, adapting working hours, isolation, care responsibilities, a blurred work/home life and uncertainty have created compassion and mutual support. Working from home and adapted work hours are two of the most common adjustments requested by disabled colleagues and are now standard within our work environment. I value hearing and acknowledging the experience of colleagues and giving and receiving support to each other.

How does the organisation benefit from having you as a colleague?

I have a broad set of skills, experience (Financial Services, VCSE, NHS mental health clinical and employment service delivery in primary and secondary care settings) and qualifications (Fellow of the Association of Project Management, Qualified Teacher Status, accredited Psychotherapist) and would prefer to be known for that at work, rather than any impairment. I also seem to need change and be good at researching and finding ways of explaining the benefits of change.

How did you get to where you are today?

I think this is hard to answer for me. I have always worked hard and wanted to learn from everyone's experience. It is often when something does not go well, that

there is the most to learn and opportunity for change. I don't see why I, or anyone else, should not be able to achieve a goal or aim in life. I also took risks in life, be that foolhardy or courageous, changing from programme governance in investment banking to psychotherapy, qualifying as a teacher and teaching in Tottenham and Brixton, to moving into employment support in the Community Mental Health Team and then back to programme governance in electrical contracting and property management and then to NHS head office. I also reflect a lot and seem to enjoy change (or dislike standing still). During COVID-19, I have given up meat and dairy, switched to an electric vehicle and planned a new garden room with groundworks happening now and the room due in February. I do love the NHS, so I am very happy to be here and have met so many colleagues who want to improve patient care.

How do you champion equality, diversity and inclusion in your current role? What difference have you made?

I bring a lot of ideas and don't get too worried about barriers. I also research topics and find out current thinking and trends. I seldom have the answer to diversity and inclusion, but I can learn from others and share knowledge. The common theme in my career has been enabling change and rethinking what is currently done to improve a situation

Within our organisation, I have been a voice for redesigning reasonable adjustments processes, workplace passports and now inclusive recruitment. I am fortunate to be a Co-Chair of the DaWN staff network and been part of the team advocating for a more inclusive approach from our organisation and I have been key in promoting Disability History Month so watch out for anything purple (the colour of disabled people) in the next month.

What's the one thing we can all do to champion equality, diversity and inclusion in your view?

Simply listen to and acknowledge the opinions of others. If someone raises an alternative point in a meeting, let's acknowledge it and thank them. That creates an open space for dialogue and colleagues can be heard and valued. This can create a ripple effect and expectation that everyone should be heard and valued.

How has your role changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 incident?

Well my role changes every few months in Programme Delivery. I was in Corporate IT in March and was part of the COVID-19 response from that department. I found that after 4 months of working long hours at an intense pace meant I had to reduce my hours for a period. I felt supported by our organisation and by my self-care, and I got back to full speed quickly. I have also put on 10kg in weight so rebalanced my life with more exercise and I started the intermittent fasting diet so now I have lost that excess weight and a little bit more.

What's your typical weekend look like?

I usually enjoy meeting friends, and (in pre-COVID times) enjoyed going to the theatre or live music events. I also enjoy going for a drive in the countryside as I live in London. Currently, I stay close to home during lockdown.

What's your favourite food?

I love Asian cuisine, so it used to be Teriyaki chicken, Nasi Goreng or Pad Thai. As part of lockdown I have given up meat, so at the moment it's Vietnamese mango deep-fried seabass or a good mixed fruit bowl topped with soya yogurt, or if I am in Brazil a bowl of acai topped with granola!

What would your colleagues be surprised to discover about you?

Well, like my career, my personal interests are quite a mix. I enjoy driving my classic car, a 1999 Mercedes SLK automatic (due to my leg problems I cannot drive manual cars). I also speak Portuguese, Spanish and French. I also love dance and theatre performances and was lucky enough to perform in several musicals including West End Live in 2006! If all that seems surprising, I also used to stage manage professional Body Building events at Canary Wharf and Hackney Empire.