

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Hi, and welcome to Doing the Opposite Business Disruptors, the podcast where you get to meet leaders who have swum against the tide, thrown out the rule book and changed the way their sector does business for good I'm Jeff Dewing and I'm the founder and CEO of Cloud Facilities Management, an FM business, where we thrive on taking data driven risk so our clients don't have to.*

*Today, we're going to meet Mark Webb. Mark has been living with his condition of Multiple Sclerosis since the 90s, although not officially diagnosed until 2007, he has actively behaved in a way that allows him to lead an almost normal life. During his career at Dixon's retail later laterally Dixon's car phone, he tells his story of the support, the organization and the institution offered him in a total caring way, which also helped him grow within the organization despite the barriers that he faced.*

*He soon reached the top of his game as head of media and PR at Dixon's car phone, working a reduced week to allow his therapy. And he enjoyed every moment. Since moving on Mark now enjoys helping the disability community through a fantastic charity called shift.MS. Mark also incredibly plays wheelchair rugby, although he does claim he's not very good. And I think that might be a bit of humbleness. Now, I'm really interested to understand more about Mark's challenges along his journey and the impact his mindset had had on the way he went about navigating those challenges.*

*Hello and welcome Mark. And thank you so much for joining me today. It's great to have you on the show.*

**Mark Webb:**

Thank you so much for the invite.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*You're more than welcome. So, I'm really looking forward to this. I've done quite a bit of research on you. I've I have some knowledge of the disability agenda because of some very close friends, I have that run Purple Tuesday. And I'm fascinated to hear your story after reading quite a bit of stuff on you actually it's it makes some really, really good reading, interesting reading.*

*So, I guess Mark, firstly, can you try and set the scene for us first and foremost about your condition when you first become aware of it? I understand that you were diagnosed in, in 2007 officially, but sort of try and set the scene for us about the journey you've been on and challenges you've had to navigate.*

**Mark Webb:**

Yeah, so I've got multiple sclerosis. I, I don't think this will be on camera, but below my waist and below the camera that you and I are looking at is both a wheelchair and a super pubic catheter. So, a tube through my tummy where I can, wee so pour it in and pour it out. It's quite handy that in terms of diagnosis, like many people with multiple sclerosis, it creeps up on you because it, it, it comes and goes early on before it gets more advanced. So I can trace my first symptoms to the street and the date, well, the year, at least 1992, when I was working for Euro Disney and my first symptoms were three days of pins and needles or, or actually nails and needles, I call them, down my left hand side which then went and I ignored it. I later convinced myself I'd had a minor stroke, which of course, if you're having a stroke, you get to a hospital. So, but I was in my twenties and, and ignoring stuff. Later on, I had bladder issues and various other, but I didn't put things together until 2007. As you said so 15 years and if you do the math, that's also my 30th anniversary of having MS is yeah, this year.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Wow. And of course, you've, you've been on a, a career journey that's had to navigate and manage those challenges. Where, I guess in the absence of you, even knowing that you, you had that*

*condition you are having to presumably justify the various impact that that is having on you, without really understanding why.*

**Mark Webb:**

Yes. Yes. It, it, it's had a huge impact. Actually, as we're talking, I'm roughly a week into medical retirement so apologies if you hear some building work behind or off camera. That's because we are making sort significant adjustments to our house so that we can stay in it with me a disabled person. But throughout my career yes, it I've 15 years I was hiding it or not hiding it, ignoring it until it became obvious that it was something wrong a and thereafter, and I'm sure we'll talk about it. I, I depended, I think I did well, but I also depended on the goodwill and kindness and a word that's common in disability circuits allyship, so support from people around me.

**Mark Webb:**

So yes, it it's had a, a monumental effect on my life. As I said, I'm retired now, but I, I had a good innings, I got to, I know I look 21 but I'm actually 53 and I've done well. And I am not stopping in any way. My last work was for a charity called Shift.MS, which is a social network, which engages about 40,000 people with MS Worldwide. I'm gutted to have left that, but I've got so many bits and bobs and campaigning going on, and I'm actually filming tomorrow following up on a TV ad I did last year, so I, I'm not stopping. I I've just had to move back from the, the, the daily grind.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Good. Glad to hear it. And I think what was interesting when I read your story is that the journey you've had, which is going to bring you incredible wisdom, I guess, to enable you to, to face some of the challenges you face. But the, the bit I really did enjoy was the story with Dixon's car phone and how they reacted when they established that there was clearly a problem. What, tell us about that.*

**Mark Webb:**

Yes. it actually, it was Dixon's retail when that was established. So, 2007 was my diagnosis. I could point at three areas where, where they were just wonderful. So obviously when I was diagnosed, we had one young child and we later had another one.

I went off work for a couple of weeks to smash the walls and cry and grieve and whatever. And that's an ongoing process, as you get worse. But by the time they came back the team around me and again, using that phrase allyship, they'd done some research into MS and, and not just the condition, which is called sometimes the snowflake disease, because it affects every single person differently. But also, how I would be feeling. So, I carried on I, I was head of group head of group PR.

**Mark Webb:**

So, the corporate PR at the time, and I could carry on for a good while two or three years perhaps. That's one fantastic way of the team dealing with me. Two or three years later, I was really struggling. If, you know, PR that's a lot of time in London, drinking with journalists, long hours, strange calls during, you know, a crisis on a Sunday evening and I was starting not to cope and I'm going to paraphrase, but I was called into a room. I had dreaded the moment and I was either expecting the guilty check, the check that was, yeah, thanks very much off you go into the sunset, you know bye-bye or 'Mark you're not coping. So, we're going to make you chief photocopy boy and leave you in the corner' or whatever.

**Mark Webb:**

Neither of those things happened, actually, what they said was, again, paraphrasing, look, Mark, we love what you do, but you're not coping or you're not going to cope. What can we do to create a role

for you and for the business that will keep you working, but also benefit the business? Now it so happened. So, this is 2009, 2010, when social media was becoming more and more important as a communications tool. You know, we'd gone through the Facebook and Farmville phase. But Twitter and I was engaging with journalists more on Twitter than, than on the phone, because on, on the phone, I would talk to a business journalist either in a crisis or selling a story or a quarterly result. But now I was tweet, I was either tweeting with them every day or regularly reporting. So, and so from the mail on Sundays reporting about green energy, what could we do, et cetera?

**Mark Webb:**

So, it, it became obvious that I, I could work as a, a new role head of group social media, which was not the, the funky the innocent drink type stuff. It was the corporate work. So, there were three feeds, essentially. There was mine talking to journalists, there was the Dixon's car retail, then Dixon's car phone PLC feed, and Sebastian James who now runs boots. But I, I always believe in authenticity in, in comms. But I nagged him to tweet or suggested him tweets, which he would then put out in his own voice. And two things happened, well, 3,

1. I felt still valuable to the company. And I think I was. 2, Sebastian became the most followed FTSE 100 CEO on Twitter. And finally, the, the, the feeds were of such interest that, that they became a new outlook for, for journalists. And we actually had the tweets, my tweets, Seb's tweets, Dixon's car phones, tweets, and particularly the Telegraph picked it up. They would print those in the results pages, and it was just amazing. And I I'm just surprised nobody else has done it.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's, that's fascinating. Especially as, as you say, it's almost like you begin that journey. And I mean, I guess the bit that, that, that really excites me about that, that story is when you've got a corporate and, and as we all know, there's lots of corporates and there's lots of corporates that talk the talk, but don't walk the talk and, to see, and to listen and to hear a corporate like Dixon's and then Dixon's Carphone behave in a humane way to the extent they later did with you is, is really, really refreshing. It just brings back to the reality of, you know, some of the things that we are all getting so wrong in the way in which we perhaps, you know, solve problems and address people's problems and take 'em seriously and realize that though those people, despite their elements or their challenges can still can still reach the stars. Right. They can still make huge differences despite the challenges they face.*

**Mark Webb:**

Yes. Absolutely. And I, you know, just to conclude the Dixons story, I, I said there were three great points when I eventually, I, I, I just, couldn't I'd gone down to four days a week. And at some point, I just couldn't even cope with that. And I went to them and said look guys, it, it is time for me to go. I, I can't remember if I had three months' notice or six months' notice. But they just sent me off with a lot more than that. And it was just astonishing, really. There was no requirement to, to give me any more than that. And yes, throughout my journey with a seller of, yeah, funky stuff, iPads and whatever, but basically running big sheds in out of town locations selling washing machines and, and cookers. They were just, just wonderful. And my previous experiences I'd always gone for the fun stuff. I'd been a holiday rep. I'd worked for Disney, and I worked for David Lloyd leisure. So, it was always just more fun than, than top career. And actually, some of the highlights came from my Dixon's time and it was astonishing.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Yeah. Which is again fantastic. Do you think that was, because was it, was that genuinely driven from the top, that sort of culture, that behavior, or was it just that you had good influences in the business?*

**Mark Webb:**

A bit of both. I, I I'd like to think I was doing a good job. But no. My I, I, I was, I was very senior in a FTSE 100. And I know my, the, the CEO Seb was directly involved in the decision to keep me on at the time I made the move and we had to recruit my replacement and I was involved in the interview of the recruitment on my replacement. I can remember I was with either a walking stick or a crutch at the time. And she joined - she's gone on to, she's a board member at premier foods now - she joined partly because she saw how well I'd been treated. So, I, it, yeah, it was just, just a knock on effect, but it, it had become the decision had come from the top.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Mm. Which is great. It's heartwarming. It's fantastic.*

*Okay. So, Mark, let's now get a little bit deeper cause a bit I'm really interested in as well is knowing that the topic of our discussions about how people do the complete opposite, they change the rules, change the game. I'm really interested to have an example of perhaps more specifically where you've behaved in a way or done something or taken some action. That's completely the opposite that really had an impacting outcome for you or your family or your colleagues or your friends. Have you got an example that you can perhaps take us through on, on something on that subject?*

**Mark Webb:**

Yeah. I've mentioned that I went for fun and the timing of my career: I was at university I'd been a holiday rep in the ski resorts of Switzerland and France before I joined Manchester university and I was doing French. So, a language course means a third year out and in, in France and that so happened to be 1992, which if you recall dear listener was my first symptoms, but it actually coincided with the opening of Euro Disney, which I went along really as a holiday rep. And I, I guess I was kind of a, a posh holiday rep because my job in that first year of, of Euro Disney I was looking after A-list celebrities. So, I had Michael Jackson in my car for three days.

**Mark Webb:**

Remember, I know we've got some scandal that we can talk about now, but at that point it was the three questions. Does he have an oxygen tent? Nope. Is bubbles the chimpanzee with him? Nope. Has he had plastic surgery? Oh, bloody hell, yes. But yes, Michael Jackson, Kevin Costner, Clint Eastwood, George Bush Senior, just an astonishing career for a 20 something year old. And, but at the end of that year, I was supposed to go back to university and my, my poor granddad died. Every day he would nag me about it. 'And when you going back', but I wrote to Manchester university and said, can I have one more year off? Because I'm really enjoying Disney. And I never went back.

**Mark Webb:**

So, I've done three years of a four year course at Manchester university, but I had 10 years at Disney, which was obviously hugely formative. That was eight years at Disneyland Paris a year, nearly a year at Walt Disney television and a year on a corporate comms project. And now you, you mentioned family. So, so one, 10 years at Disney is amazing. I've got cuddly toys coming out my ears and beautiful pictures and statues and whatever, but more importantly, I met my wife. She was marketing director for the gaming division at the time, she went on to be marketing director for Disney stores. So yes yeah, a bit too much Disney, and that's why we left in the end, but that totally shaped my career. Having met all these celebrities and seen them being interviewed and filmed and whatever I sort of moved into PR naturally. So, it 1- I met my beautiful wife with whom we've got two beautiful children and 2 - it shaped PR as my calling in life.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Which is fantastic. And yeah, what a great story. And it's one of those things when again, I've got a few colleagues that, that are in marketing global marketing that, that gets to media listers and, and some of the stories are just off the scale. I mean, they're, some of them are heartwarming, some of 'em are shocking, but, but all in all, it's, it's, it's a, it's an experience that you, can't not enjoy. It's, it's part of life experience. Right. So unbelievable.*

*So, thanks for that. And again, really, really interesting story. So as you then move through your career, you've now found yourself in PR. Try and take us down the journey of, of, you know, that, that situation where you, you have to get comfortable feeling uncomfortable, where you do something that again, is perhaps goes against the grain or isn't what most people would normally do. Is, is there another example you've got that may take us on that journey?*

**Mark Webb:**

Well, I, I've taken you through the Dixon stuff. But I think the magic of PR - I started in consumer PR so again, you know 'Disney announces this', 'Dixons is selling great, you know, 399 laptops', whatever.

But then I moved into corporate and the, the, the most wonderful, and it's awful to say this, but the most, the most wonderful times where you really earn your money are the crises. And I, I dealt with so many Disney. We, we one of the hotels burnt down or partly burnt down in oh, 1994, 1995. If you Google Mark Webb Euro Disney and Sequoia, you'll find my first appearance in the New York times. I was on the phone to national international media while we were lending clothes to people who'd been -nobody was killed.

**Mark Webb:**

But everybody had had to leave the room, the, the hotel quickly. But yes, all through my life, I loved the crisis. This was the time when you had an element of control over a flapping CEO generally. And this took me through the 2008 downturn, which probably feels relatively mild compared to what we're going through now. But that was a massive downturn. And Dixon shares were down as low as nine pence and yeah, there were calls from credit insurers. These are people who I don't even quite understand, but they insure the products. They, they insure that manufacturers against us going busted. And it, we were really up against the wall with the CEO called John Brow at the time. And then we went through the merger, Dixon's retail to Dixon's Carphone which not sure it worked out very well, because as it turns out smartphones were integral to, to our lives.

**Mark Webb:**

But actually, people were not buying them every two years and the transition for, for it, 'they're just great phones now, and you don't automatically update them every two years'. So, Dixon's became a little bit the dominant force and now smartphones are, are just a category alongside washing machines and laptops and whatever. So, it wasn't the best merger, but then, again, the, that was huge business transaction dealing with Sir Charles Dunston just a, a wonderful time. So that was a bit of waffle, but I, I really just wanted to say that PR we, we sometimes get a bad rap but when there's a crisis on and whether I was doing that in PR terms or, or social media terms I earned my money.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*I guess it is something that, luckily, I'm not particularly familiar with, I've been through one or two crisis issues, but not that I've had to manage, I've had a great communications manager/director that's, that's managed it. And when you, when you see how they address it, it's actually, it is a skill set in itself. Right? And, and it's pretty, it's the ability to un-dramatize something everyone else is dramatizing. So, it's, it's pretty special when you see it unfold.*

**Mark Webb:**

Yes. yeah. And, and like I said, you see the CEO flapping and I've gone through all my roles. There's always been a crisis handbook, you know, 'how to deal with a crisis'. And every single time I've checked it out the window, because every single crisis an issue, you know, because there's a big crisis, like, like, you know, Dixon's nearly going bust or a hotel burning down, but there's every day somebody saying writing to the CEO and, or tweeting to the CEO, or a small issue in a store where a manager's behaved weirdly or whatever. And just every time the answer is different and, and we, oh gosh, there was a whole, there were pages and pages of sample responses to a crisis at Dixons and I was supposed to update it, but I never did because every crisis risk required something or, or main issue, every single one required a different response, every single one.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Yeah. Yeah, of course. I guess harnessed is by the fact of whatever that issue is, it's all about, does it tick one box? Is it doing the right thing? You know, are we behaving the right way? And I guess that essentially becomes the umbrella statement.*

**Mark Webb:**

Yes. So, you know, there's, there is a formula you need to apologize or explain and say what you're doing to sort it out etc. So there, there are, there is a basic format. But beyond that yes, it, you just got to make your company when I explain PR to people, I say, it's getting, getting your company in the papers when you want them in the, in the papers and keeping them out when you don't want them in the papers that, that that's, that's the basic skill.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*That's a great summary. Yeah.*

*So just the next bit, I'm, I'm, I guess I'm interested as we sort of move into the final stages is, is I'm, I'm interested in how you have helped and been engaged in the charity that you've recently left. I I'm interested in understanding that charity and, and shift.MS. And, and how that's helping the community of which you've been part.*

**Mark Webb:**

Yeah. So, I think that there, there are three or four MS Charities all fulfilling a role. So there's the big one, which is the MS Society and that's got reams of information and do great publicity for MS, which is, I think the most common disabling condition in young people it's normally diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 40. And I was diagnosed age 39, but looking back, I had it in my TW in my early twenties or mid-twenties.

Shift.MS – it's founded by an MSer. That's what we call ourselves an MSer who was diagnosed young. And really when you are diagnosed, you don't want to see the bloke in the wheelchair. And, and a lot of charities deal with the later stages because you don't early on, you don't want, know what to do, and you fear the wheelchair.

**Mark Webb:**

Now I have to confess, I was kind of repulsed by the wheelchair. But it's fine. I play wheelchair rugby now really badly. But you know, it, it's fine. But so, George was young he's still the CEO and he couldn't find a place to talk to people. Like-minded people, people early in their career of MS and so he founded shift.MS to fulfill that gap. So he wasn't avoiding wheelchairs and wheelchair users could be, you know, for example, there's lot, lots of paths of MS but he founded it just, just to chat and say, look, you know, you go on, it's like a social network, but for people with MS or carers, but you

go on there and say, look, I've got this tingling in my right toe. Anybody had any idea what to do about it?

**Mark Webb:**

Is it MS or am I imagining it? And you can chat away. It's just a, a social network where you can talk anonymously if you want to, because a lot of times you don't want to, I, I was very lucky in the way I was judged by people and colleagues and whatever. But a lot of people don't want to, I, I blurted it out. That's my natural instinct and I, I kind of regret that, but, you know, I got through it. But people just want to know stuff. And research now shows that if you get hold of a, an MSer early and get them on the right treatment path - exercise, healthy, eating healthy, sleeping, etc. The outcome is much better. And, and there won't be so many people even now as get getting as seriously ill as me.

**Mark Webb:**

And, and the hope, and the reason I still campaign both for MS but also the wider disability environment. It is just well for MS I'm, I'm hoping my son's not here, but they have a, they have a higher chance of developing MS than the average person. So, you know, I'm hoping treatments will continue to improve. And disability is just it's actually the largest minority, you know, diversity is this huge buzzword now, is it not, but on a panel and I'm always speaking on panels or, or, you know a keynote speaker or whatever. But the, always the default for a diversity panel is gender, sexuality, ethnicity. And then if you are really lucky disability, despite us being the largest sort of somewhere between 15 and 20%, so up to one in five people have a disability. And there's one I don't want to scare you, but there is one saying that, you know, anybody, 'everybody is just not yet disabled'. And there's some truth in that. You know, you hobbling along 90 year old, a 90 year old with a walking stick. He, he, she is disabled. So, I just need to shout out for disability.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Yeah. And again, it's one of the things, as I said before, you know, my colleague Mike, you know, he's peer group and me, us are inspired by the way he goes about it, because it, it does bring, it changes the disability conversation for the good and it's, and it's that inclusion that recognition and, and understanding that there's so much that we, as a society able bodied are missing out on by, by the lack of inclusion of, of disabled. And I think it, it's, it's been spectacular to watch. And, and your testament to that through your beliefs and your views on, on what you've gone through yourself and what you've been going through, and, and obviously supporting your colleagues in in, in the charity and the campaigning work. So, you know, you know, more power to elbow well done.*

**Jeff Dewing:**

*It's, it's been great. It's a great inspirational story.*

*So, listen, we're going to wrap it up now, Mark. I've really, really enjoyed it. I've really enjoyed listening to the story and the stories. And I guess on the back of your experience, your knowledge, your wisdom, your career, your life experience, if you had to give one piece of advice to somebody that wanted to tackle a challenge or become an entrepreneur, or start a business, or you know, they was, they was anxious or nervous about a decision they was going to make, whether it be disability related or whether it be career related or, or start-a-business related, what, what one piece of advice would you give somebody that was really teetering on the edge of not knowing what to do?*

**Mark Webb:**

Golly, I think people as employers are underrated, so we'd all like to work for Apple or Disney or whatever. I wouldn't have minded working for Jim Beam. But the, the, the choice I made to work for

people who were decisive in, in asking me to work for them. And then, and also, I enjoyed their company during the interview process. That was massive for me. I guess that if I'm allowed two pieces of advice so that, that was the one. So, consider the people you are working for, not just the sexy brand or this, your sexy idea, but choose the people to work with. The other point that I, I have to, because I'm disabled is I've got to mention the diversity point. It's, it's the new tick box. So, 10 years ago, we were talking about green, and most people now get it.

**Mark Webb:**

And that, you know, everybody has their sustainability programs. Now, diversity, everybody kind of understands they need to do it. They employ a diversity and inclusion officer, or they have chats from people like me to train them up on disability awareness, for example. But the value of diversity in a company just is not rated enough yet. And diversity includes gender. I always make the point that suffragettes fought for women's vote over a hundred years ago, and we still haven't got equal pay and equal job opportunities for women. So, when you add in ethnicity and, and all the other diverse communities, there's so much work to do, and there's so much value in having a diverse workforce and you're then dealing with diverse customers,

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Of course. Yeah. And the diversity is where the richness is. And I think that's the bit where, as an intelligent species, why is it taking us so long to realize that we are missing out on all this enrichment? But listen, it's, it's about momentum, right? So, we're on the journey. ESG is now becoming a, a, a number one agenda in most boardrooms. And I think, you know, part of that inclusion and with people and, and investors like yourself and like Mike Adams that are pushing this disability conversation, changing the conversation. Hopefully it's going to, it is going to get some traction at a much higher, accelerated pace and, and, and to everybody's benefit.*

**Mark Webb:**

Yes. And thank you for being an ally. You, you know, the fact you are talking to me and you, you deal with Mike Adams who, who I know well also. Thank you.

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Yep. You're welcome. You're welcome. And it's been absolutely fantastic talking to you Mark. It's been incredible getting to know you and I wish you all the best of the future. I hope we can stay in touch in one form or another if and especially if we can perhaps get, get together, we might one day be even great, even better. But thank you very much your time. Thank you for sharing your story and your candor. And I hope to see you again soon. It's been an absolute pleasure and I apologize for any building work sounds behind me. <Laugh> no problem. Cheers.*

**Jeff Dewing:**

*Wow. What a great story. A huge thanks to mark for taking the time to talk to me. There's some interesting stuff come out of that discussion. The fact that he was diagnosed in 2007, yet he could put his finger on pretty much the exact time that MS had kicked into his body in his early twenties back in 1992, because of some feelings that he had, that he then realized were linked to MS. Yet with the stiff upper lip attitude that we tend to have as a society. He decided to take no action. 'It'll be okay'. And how different may his life have been if he'd have acted and reacted at that time? No one knows.*

*But then also listening to the story of Dixon's retail and then Dixon Carphone the empathy that his team showed, and ultimately the CEO at the time where their care for Mark meant that not only did, they do the right thing, but they enabled Mark to thrive and the business to thrive as a result.*



**Jeff Dewing:**

*They didn't act with fear or malice or concern. They genuinely put their people first. There's a lot of businesses could learn a lot from that story. And the power of giving people the strength, the resilience, the comfort, the safety to be their best selves, despite the challenges and barriers that they face.*

*And of course, the joy of listening to Mark's journey at Disney and the ultimate quest that he met his wonderful wife during that journey and had two incredible children and that he's still living life with fun and joy, despite his ailments. And of course, he's now a campaigner where he is doing good for lots and lots of other people bringing disability and diversity to the fore, which is where it's always belonged. So, thank you so much Mark, and appreciate the time you've given us today.*

**Jeff Dewing:**

*I'm Jeff Dewing, author of the bestselling book *Doing the Opposite* and chief exec of Cloud Facilities Management. Cloudfm are changing the rules of our industry and doing the opposite to create best value for our clients. If you'd like to know more, please visit our website [cloudfmgroup.com](http://cloudfmgroup.com) or follow us on LinkedIn. You can also find out more about the podcast and my incredible guests at [podcast.cloudfmgroup.com](http://podcast.cloudfmgroup.com). Finally, a big thanks again to my team, Nichola Crawshaw at Cloudfm, Sarah Waddington of Astute PR, Thinking Hat PR. And of course, my incredible production team. What goes on media who have helped me launch this incredible disruptive podcast. Thanks for listening.*