**Title**

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Link

Description

**Speaker(s):**

Erica Birtles

Sandra Ballij

**Transcript:**

00:00:08:00 - 00:35:40:15

**Erica:**

Hello and welcome back to another episode of Let's Talk Universal, a podcast sponsored by the UWI, which is an organization helping companies to harness the power of their workforce.

Today I am joined by Sandra Ballij, founder and owner of Ctalents and international speaker on inclusion.

Welcome, Sandra. I’m so pleased to have you join us today.

**Sandra:**

Well, thank you for having me, Erica.

Love to have a little chat about our favorite subject.

**Erica:**

Absolutely.

So let's get right on into it.

Can you tell our audience a little bit about you and what led you to where you are today as the founder of Ctalents?

**Sandra:**

Yeah, Ctalents is not my first social enterprise I founded. I started back in 2007, I made a big switch from being a banker to being a social entrepreneur. And in 2007, I started Dining in the Dark restaurant, which was quite new at that moment. At this point, I think there are about30 of them in the world, so that makes a great progression In the Dining in the Dark restaurant, only the true experts of the dark work there mostly known by other people, as people who are blind or have a bad sight. Yeah, that's where my adventure started.

And then I got a little bit hooked to this subject. I met so many talented people who made me aware of well, things where I had a blind spot on and I met so many people who had university degrees and were just working in my restaurant. And there's nothing wrong with working in a restaurant. But if you pass your bar or your PhD in marketing, there are different opportunities for you as well, according to my perspective.

And that's actually how Ctalents was born. It's also to make sure, it's our mission that everyone can be seen, heard and valued for his or her talents.

And well, Ctalents is a secondment agency who’s only there for people who are blind or deaf or hard of hearing or have a visual impairment. And yeah, and in between I’ve founded also the Sign Language Coffee Bar, which is a coffee catering company where you can only order in sign language. So, who's the handicapped person now? Where we trained people who happened to be deaf to become the best baristas of the world. And well, the customers can teach themselves how to order. With a little video in 10 seconds, you could sign, for example, your tea or cappuccino. Well, it's quite fun. And that was also a fast growing company, and now, yeah, a big catering company is continuing that dream.

**Erica**

Some really exciting stuff. You've been very, very busy, Sandra.

**Sandra:**

I’m busy busy, but it's also so much fun, so.

**Erica:**

Yeah, and what is it that is fullfilling to you about, you know, all of these things that you've been doing, what do you find fulfills you as a person with this work?

**Sandra:**

I have a quick answer and a longer version. What do you want? I’ll try to do them both.

I think the quick question is I'm just going to quote one of our talents who said, like Sandra, because of this, I went from surviving to living again. So people get back on their feet, not only having a job, but having a life again, because being seen is doing so much more than just giving you your money of course.. So people, you know, buy houses, start families, do a lot of things they thought they were not capable of doing before they started their career, of their opportunities.

And what I mostly see in social entrepreneurs. They almost all have a personal story as well, and so am I. So that's, you know, you must be a little bit crazy to do, you know. So to start a business where the market is not developed on supply and demand, you know, side, you must be a little bit crazy to start that, so that's mostly a personal purpose.

And I think mine is, when I was around 18 years old, from one day to another, I collapsed and I could not walk anymore. So I, I got in a wheelchair and that was very scary. And I think the most scary part of that was that people were not talking to me anymore, but to the person behind me. I needed to stop for some time my university college. And while it has a huge, huge impact in your life that just like one day this can happen. And I think I was lucky, I was a lucky one because it's a rare disease that can be in silent mode. So it's in silent mode now. And I was very lucky because after a few weeks it already got in silent mode, so I got my chance to, you know, get my life back. But I take the lesson of not being seen and heard or valued for my possibilities because nobody was asking any more about my future. There were only questions about taking care of you. And it felt so, so bad. And I made a deal with myself that I never want to feel that again.

So yeah, I do not have any influence on having a disease or not, but I do have influence how to cope with it, but also how to influence the world to see different to people, to really be seeing what their added value is.

**Erica:**

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that, Sandra.

I think there is a relatable story, I think for a lot of people in the sense that, you know, something can change instantly overnight and prevent you from doing X, Y or Z and then it affects the way that you relate to the world around you and the world relates to you.

**Sandra:**

Exactly, you know, it could happen to everyone. And that's well, I figure that's a good insight. And also, I think I was determined, I never want to be in that situation again. I also felt like no one should be in that situation again. So I think that's the foundation of all my social enterprises.

**Erica:**

Sure. Yes.

Let's talk about Ctalents then. So if you could kind of bring it down to one thing that it does, what what does it help? What problem is it helping organizations to solve? What is it that it's doing for them?

**Sandra:**

Okay, well, we are a recruitment, a secondment agency, for a very specialized talent.

So, what do we solve? Well, there is a huge demand for labor, for people who can add value and maybe make sure that your company, you know, improves themselves on a different level.

So, we have only talents who either have a huge focus or an eye for detail because they are deaf and that can translate in so many type of jobs. Being an accountant or a financial expert or data scientist. Or we have talents with a talent of hearing what's not being said but being meant in the conversation. So, we see people who work from that side as a specialist in HR, in mediation, but also making policies or marketing strategies, also the translation of strategies.

That was not a one sentence. One sentence is the untapped pool of talent.

**Erica:**

Yeah, no, and what markets is that, is that specific industries, is that particular levels of an organization or is that multiple levels?

**Sandra:**

It's multiple levels, where our main partners are like the banking industry, the professional financial services industry. And we also work, for example, the Dutch police and a large university. So, this type of organizations is where we currently work on. But, you know, I'm sure we can do this in every sector, but we need some speed to get there.

Our mission also in part is, by 2030, I want to make sure that at least 5000 people have a big step in their career through us, and at least one of them is being a CEO. So, to point out that's the level we're talking about. We're not there yet, but we make sure that everyone can make a little step, a little step, a little step.

And there are people who are highly ambitious in our group of people. And people who are just fine with their job, you know, just a regular group of people. So by 2030, I can definitely say all levels, including the CEO. We're not there yet, but we are already in quite high levels. Yeah.

**Erica:**

That's an admirable goal and I hope you reach it.

When organizations first approach, Ctalents or yourself, what stage are they at with this? You know, what are they looking to achieve?

**Sandra:**

Yeah, well, I mostly see this roadmap. There are like five stages of it. And in beginning our activities, they were all in step one, which is “I'm not aware of this at all”. And about 88% of organizations are still there.

So I'm talking about disability inclusion, which is very niche. And a lot of people, when I get connected, who are even responsible for the department of inclusion, then their disability inclusion is not really part of that yet. They're on the level: female, male, LGBTQ+, cultural diversity, but not disability inclusion yet. I think that's mostly because it's unknown.

If people do reach out now, it's because they're on the second step and that's because of legislation. So there is legislation in Holland which promotes to hire people with a disability as well. And I always think it's quite inspiring to start from that point, because then there's someone accountable for the subject and then the only thing we need to do is to, well, enlarge their world, that there's so much more possible than just doing it out of legislation part or organizations come because they have a lack of talent.

You know, there’s lots of work at a certain point it's like, okay, what the hell? I brought it up, let's give it a try. And that's that's a possibility in other possibilities that people really do have a strategy on it, a vision. That’s mostly because there's a CEO or someone very on high level who has also embraced the subject themselves. And then, we mostly meet them on lots of levels.

And I think the next steps, there are not so many organizations in those steps yet so that they already have the capabilities in that. And the next step is they really trust it and they are all organized around it. And the last part is that you really create a competitive edge because you truly reach inclusion in the full perspective. Yeah. Yeah.

**Erica:**

And with that kind of, is that a challenge if they're in that first phase of kind of getting them to move from that first phase into the second?

**Sandra:**

You need to prove. Yeah, definitely need to prove, because a lot of people think I'm just bullshitting them til they experience it and that's, you know, it's not so weird because, especially in the Netherlands, until not so long ago, people who are blind or deaf got automatically ‘100%’ disabled and got Social Security. And we're put away in schools and areas where they could live. So, not a very inclusive approach of people who are a little bit different.

So, a lot of people do not have any experience with or do not know anyone who happens to be blind or deaf. It doesn't mean they don't exist.

**Erica:**

Yeah, yeah.

Was there any other kind of holdbacks in that process, do you find, within an organization

that prevents them, you know from your experience of working with them, that prevents them from I don't know, adopting this talent?

**Sandra:**

Definitely.. There are quite, quite some.

That's a reason why we need it. I hope in ten years time we're not needed any more and it flows. I think the first one is the unconscious bias, that they really think that people are blind

or deaf have less IQ and less capabilities, which is complete bullshit. Like this is the sign [signs ‘bullshit’ in sign language]. I'm just putting it out here because people can really remember this is bullshit. And it really is.

But they have normal IQ. So, there are people who are very high IQ, but also people who are very low, but most of them are in their normal rate, just like another type of group of people you have. And the second unconscious bias is that they think that they cannot work on regular pace. Well, I already hired more than 500 of them. Mostly when we meet them, that's true, because they need to be trained in it as well. To use the tooling that exists nowadays to work very good with that. So, it’s not true that they cannot work a regular pace, but it is true proved that a lot of them still need training to get there.

And the third one is really about accessibility because a lot of the toolings only work when you have approval of the IT department. You need some software. I think there's a lot of regulation about that you already should have it or are obliged to have it. But the translation of that is still, well, somewhere in between.

So I think we are here to inspire organizations, to really make a strategy on it and translate that. Because if you still want to be there in ten years time, you need this untapped pool of talent. So you need to be accessible. That's not a nice to have. It's a need to have. Absolutely.

**Erica:**

And it's the same story with, you know, other groups as well, you know, neurodivergent talent and women, you know, they're they're all untapped pools of talent that companies are just not accessing. Right now for a number of reasons, as you've just mentioned.

But what I think that our listeners would be interested to know is, with Ctalents and the services that it provides organizations, what kind of outcomes, perhaps benefits, they can look to see as a result of working with Ctalents and adopting this talent into their workforce?

**Sandra:**

Yeah.

So, we have a program which exists out of four elements. One is the accessibility, one is about accountability, third one is about empowerment, and the fourth one is about sustainable impact on the workforce. So, if you get this translated in your organization well, it leads that you can be a true inclusive organization, which leads to, I think, a positive workforce flow. So you'll be attractive also for the new generation.

I think the new generation really happy with them. I think they can really make the change because the yeah, the old boys network people don't want to work there anymore because they cannot truly be themselves. And if you cannot be truly yourself, you also cannot really add the value as you can to an organization.

Where we do see, you know, in real life where our talents work, what we do see is that if one of our talents start working in the department, that the overall sick leave also diminishes. It's really fun to see that. We try to ask what happens? And it's also about perspective. People get inspired that so much more is possible than they thought. And I think that overall, if work happiness is high, sick leave is lower. So, if all people can do what they’re really good at, if you are able to organize that in your organization, that's your added value.

And our job carve method is, you know, it's supporting that.

**Erica:**

I know that we've spoken about, you know, this awareness piece and this, you know, bringing that awareness into the organization first. But to really see this kind of program, for lack of a better word, succeed in an organization, is there something that it absolutely needs, such as, you know, someone who is in the work place and leading this?

**Sandra:**

Definitely.

Accountability, you know, it's one of our program elements. Accountability is key. If there's not a strategy, a vision with targets there, then it's just a coochie-coochie project, it will die within a year. No offense, but as with all the changes and innovation things you want to make in your company or organization, there's always a plan. A strategy. Why are you doing this? Who is accountable for it? What's the budget with it and what are the targets we need to get in the first year?

But also, please, please, please do have a long term strategy. Otherwise it's not a strategy. Then it's a project.

So what we notice is that you always need action from board level. You need a person who's accountable for it. And next to that, you also have your HR department, but also a lot of layers of managers, hiring managers. You know, there are always are a lot of people who are very positive to the subject. You only need to find them and then make sure they have the budget and the accountability for it. And it can really grow quite quickly.

**Erica:**

Yeah, and we've obviously kind of covered the organization, but what about the talent itself? Because when we've previously spoken and we've also kind of talked about the mindset change that also needs to happen with the talent itself, because for so long they've been perhaps told that they're not good enough for a role.

**Sandra:**

So true.

So it's not all of them, of course, because I do not like to talk about a whole group as one feature. But you can imagine if you hear every day, you're not capable of doing something that maybe one day you start believing that. And I think if you've got raised on special schools with a lot of care around you, that you have not a clear vision of your own potential as well because nobody spoke with you about it. And if you try to start that conversation, it's not for you.

So we meet a lot of people who are still not aware of about all their capabilities. So, yes, we have conversations ourselves, but we also connect because now we have a huge community of people already, you know, going to break into their careers. And we’re always asking them, can you be the example for someone else?

I really believe in the power by themselves because they're so talented, they're motivated to really get there, but there needs to be a start. And also, the people around them, like their mother, their teacher or whoever you can think of, they're mostly also not aware of the possibilities. I got phone calls like, what the hell are you thinking? You cannot tell my son this, it’s not possible, but it is possible. So, you know, it's quite deep in society. So, also with the talents themselves.

So, what do we do, we do assessments to make sure what their IQ is, but also their competencies. We make sure to get the training. For example, when you're blind from a visual, non visual, working, it's, you know, it's a skill you can learn like every skill in the world. But so yeah, there is always some work that needs to be done and next to that, they also need to be empowered. For when what's your added value to an organization that you're not going to talk about your medical history, you know, nobody really cares about that. People care about, what are you going to act? So, I think that's our program also... that's why we’re a social enterprise.

**Erica:**

Yeah. Sure, sure, and I think it would be interesting as well to get your perspective on diversity, equity and inclusion just across the board.

We've obviously in recent months seen a bit of a dip in the interest or the drive, whatever you want to call it, behind those diversity programs and inclusion programs in organizations.

Can I ask from your perspective, what's happening with inclusion in the European market?

**Sandra:**

I do not recognize actually what you're saying that the programs are less, so in the Netherlands I don't see that going down. Actually, what I do see that there's more movement now because there is, on a European level, there is a corporate social responsibility narratives. They’re only focused on the large organizations, of course, the corporates, but, because they need to report on their impact they’re also going to give these directives to their supplier, which are the smaller companies as well, and that's already from 2025.

So, actually, I start things moving now because there's even on board level now someone responsible for getting the corporate social responsibility directives. It's a report you need to have next to your annual normal numbers, which is the most important for a lot of organizations. So yeah, now they need to communicate about their impact. So what I see is that people are now thinking, oh okay, now we really need to do something if they were not doing anything. And if they were already doing things, they now get the support to, well, make their program a little bit bigger.

**Erica:**

Yeah, I think that's interesting in the sense that, you know, it's the emphasis is placed on the corporate social responsibility and diversity and inclusion is a piece of that, whereas I think we see in markets like the U.S., where it's very isolated from that and it tends to be discussion all on its own.

So perhaps that's where the differences and with the changes that you're seeing in the market for inclusion, do you think there is something that perhaps is holding organizations back from making that commitment to inclusion?

**Sandra:**

Well yeah. yeah, it's not one reason. I think it depends on the organization, but mostly on the people working there. If you truly don't believe it can be working and if you only see this as doing good, then it's not going to be part of your real, you know, strategy. So, I think the number one is still that people don't know the good examples already and what they also need to do to make sure that's successful.

I always compare it. It's like you're square company and now you're trying to attract circles and triangles and it can be fitted in but not through your normal channel. So your normal channel of a square needs to adjust a little as well. You know, you know, you have the toys for the babies, you know, and you know, I should have brought it here. You see, like people try to get the triangle in the square, it's not going to fit like that. So you need to do your homework as well to make sure it fits. But it does not look like a square.

That's correct. You know, I think that's the beautiful saying you know, if you judge a fish by its capability

to climb a tree, it will spend this whole life thinking it's stupid. That's exactly the case. If you do assessments, for example, with the graphics and you give it like that to a blind person,

what do you think what the score will be. Yeah. But in how many jobs you really need to do that type of work? There is some work I know, but most of the work where you get this assessment, you're not going to do that type of job. So is that assessment accessible? No, it's not the way people do their recruitment strategy. They do it mostly on the channels they already know, where they were coming from as well, and mostly reflect the square channels. Find the triangle channels and the circle channels! Yeah.

**Erica:**

Now I think that's a really valid point and one that I think people will be able to visualize as well.

**Sandra:**

Yeah, I make use of what I've learned from people who are blind and deaf to remember things in a different way.

**Erica:**

Yes, I think it is challenging for a lot of people to take themselves out of their own experience and to put themselves in the shoes and to see the world how they see and experience it, how they experience it.

**Sandra:**

It’s a blind spot, you don't know what you don't know. And then people say like yeah, they were open to everyone, but nobody's coming. And then we look at their website and the application, you know, the ‘apply here’ button cannot be read by the software people who are blind are using. So yeah, it's not so weird that nobody applies.

**Erica:**

And from your experience, what learning lessons are there when it comes to creating inclusion that organizations should kind of take notes of? You know, what are the important things that they need to consider?

Sandra:

Yeah, well getting back to the point because that is really about accountability. Having a strategy, understand why you are doing it really, you know, make sure that everyone in the organization really gets it, it's not doing good, it's working on your organization for the better for the future. So and these are the people who are accountable and these are their targets.

Second is accessibility. If you do not do this proactively, you will lose this game for talents too, because, well, what I see, there's a lot of development on this side. And the best of the best, they have opportunities, so they won’t work with you if you don't get the accessibility right. The empowerment. I think it’s a continuous thing, empowerment. So both things.

So also in a certain point you have a kind of group of people from, you know, disability inclusion, make sure that they organize themselves as well. So, it's a you can put knowledge out of that. So you become a real learning organization, how you attract more of these talents and make sure that they can also have a career.

So I guess my fourth point, like most organizations forget, t's about a sustainable impact. So really think through this, not about only hiring people, but also about the onboarding part, but also when they are at work, normally you have career conversations to get them to the next stage. Somehow under disability inclusion, people forget to do the normal things they do, but definitely do that because otherwise people will leave.

You know, we have Ctalents talent who started at company A, but after two or three years they come back to us. So like, I'm ready for the next step and my organization cannot see the next step yet. And then we support that as well, of course. So that's where also my vision for the first CEO comes, because if you're a company can have a blind CEO, you are sure that every level below is also accessible and inclusive. So that's, you know.

**Erica:**

Yeah, that makes sense.

And so, for organizations, for leaders in organizations who are looking to get started on their journey to inclusion or looking to adopt more talent from an organization like yours into their workplace, what would your advice be? What should their first steps be?

**Sandra:**

Don't start from the beginning because there's so much knowledge already out there. Copy paste, but not literally. Always adapt to your local culture or company. And start working together with social enterprises, you know they're really there to share their knowledge, background and mostly also formulas who could really work there. I think I have a lot of good collaboration with large corporates and I think this is helping us both. You know, it's helping our mission, but we have so much knowledge we can share, so it's really helping organizations as well.

And, really put a decent strategy on it. Yeah. Not just get five people who are handicapped. That's not right.

**Erica:**

Yeah, not the tick box, but actually as you've said just previously, you know, the sustainable programs where you can actually see continued progress because I think perfection isn't achievable straight away in a lot of these cases.

**Sandra:**

It's not.You know, you got to fall, you got to learn, you're going to fall, you're going to learn, it’s

like every new thing you're going to do because your organization is probably not yet made for it. That's why nobody is there working yet, you know, from this type of group. So it's a learning thing. So don't think it'll be done in two months. It will take some time, but make sure you put learning, continuous learning elements in your program.

**Erica:**

Yeah, and I think we've already spoken about what your goals are with Ctalents in having, you know, a CEO placed in an organization. But what do you think perhaps 2024 looks like for Ctalents or the future looks like for I don't know so for the community that you've built.

**Sandra:**

Yeah well the future looks like it's really great because the interest is growing, so new large corporates came to us and also ask us for proposal for further collaboration, not only with us, but now we're setting up collaboration with other social entrepreneurs who have their own pool of untapped talents, like people with autism, neurodiversity, well, different flavors, let's call it like that.

And because I think for a larger organization, it would really help out if we work together more closely because a lot of our subjects, like accessibility, like empowerment, like, it's kind of the same. There are some switches, of course, in how to, but we can combine this knowledge. So my dream for the coming year is that we can really execute on this plan so that we have that we can be the number one broker provider for impact, not only for the group of talents we already know, but also for my fellow social entrepreneurs.

**Erica:**

And for inclusion in a more general sense. What do you think 2024 is going to bring? Do you think you're going to we're going to see much change or that we're going to see this continued growth and interest in inclusion?

**Sandra:**

I think I'm on the good side of the business. I’m already doing this for like five, ten years. But now, you know, it started out as a really crazy idea, but now there's a true market because of, I think there is a increased interest, because of legislation of certain type. There’s also social return that really gives it a, you know, a push.

But next to that, look at the labor market. If you want to be there in a few years time, you also need to tap in this untapped pool of talent. But next to that, make sure you're an impact-focused organization, because the new generation otherwise don't want to work for you. So, I think inclusion will come with that as well, because it's more normal to look at potential instead of disabilities.

**Erica:**

Well, thank you for answering all of my questions.

But before we finish, I wanted to give you the opportunity to kind of raise anything that perhaps we've not touched on. Is there something that you'd like our audience to take away from this conversation?

**Sandra:**

Yeah, I think the most important thing if you want to do this because you want to do good and only want to do good, don't do it. You do this to enforce your business, to make sure your organization can also look on a different way and really create the competitive edge you need in the future. And why I'm putting it like this. If you really look at the something like this, then it can work out, because we have companies we already work for ten years. They have, you know, quite a base and it's working really well because of this. They're not doing good. And of course you're doing good. If you're performing, that's good. But it's a different approach, I think.

That's really the important thing of this subject. So make it a professional ambition, a professional plan, a professional execution.

**Erica:**

Well, thank you, Sandra, for joining me today and for sharing your perspectives and insights. I think the work that Ctalents is doing is great and is really quite inspiring for a lot of people.

And if anyone would like to learn more about Ctalents then they can find the links to your website on our web page at theuwi.com/podcast.

But I do really appreciate you lending your time to have this discussion with me today.

**Sandra:**

Yeah, thank you. I'm teaching you a sign, sign language [signs thank you].

**Erica:**

Thank you very much, Sandra.

**Sandra:**

Yes, thank you. Have a good day.

**Erica:**

You too.