



Transcript for Bridging generations: the power of mentoring and early careers support with Mercy Abel

Intro: Welcome to the future of internal communication podcast. I'm Jen Sproul, CEO of the Institute of Internal Communication.

Since we launched this series in 2021, the world of work has been disrupted by event after event. A pandemic, geopolitics, AI, extreme weather events, remote and hybrid working, generational shifts, inclusion, diversity - the entire nature of how we work needs transformation.

This podcast explores opportunities for internal communication in the future of work. Internal comms is a critical function that helps organisations achieve lasting change, building trust and relationship between people, in pursuit of shared goals.

Please, join me, Dominic Walters and Cat Barnard as we dissect what this means for internal communication.

With relentless change the new norm, it's time to reimagine our profession.

Dom (00:01.014)

Hello and welcome to the first episode of a brand new series, there is 16 I think, of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Dominic Walters and I'm joined as ever by my two co-hosts, Jen Sproul and Cat Barnard. And today, particularly excited because today's guest, I met back in October of last year I think it was, or maybe November, at the IOIC conference up in Glasgow and she gave a fantastic presentation about all aspects of intergenerational working but particularly about how to promote and support young people in their careers, which I have to say struck me on a personal issue because having three daughters in their twenties, the sooner they are financially independent, the better. But I know it also goes beyond my own personal circumstances because a lot of what we're going to be talking about today I think is really important for us as communicators. We've talked a lot about intergenerational working. We know that certainly older people perhaps feel less represented and Jen forgive me for this, but I saw a sneak preview of this year's IC index, this morning and it does say that people over 55 feel less represented in their organisations which is something I think quite new. But it's also important just to get people thinking about how they can make the most of opportunities in a changing world. So that's what we're going to be talking about. Now our guest today is Mercy Abel. Mercy I'll say hello to



you in a second but let me give a bit of a background before I do that. Mercy is a multi award winning marketer and founder. Is it marketeer or marketer? I don't know. Marketer is probably the more modern phrase. Founder of a future workforce consultancy called Who You Know or WIK, which helps to shape talent of tomorrow. WIK supports organisations to understand, connect and recruit incoming talent through intergenerational learning, mentorship and strategic insight. Mercy is passionate about platforming talent, building community and connecting people with opportunity and that's something we particularly want to talk about.

She's done this through co-founding an award-winning marketing and creative internship programme named Futures Unlocked, providing almost 50 paid internships and free up-skilling workshops for over 600 people in emerging creatives across Scotland. Throughout her career, Mercy has been awarded a number of things. In 2025, she was listed in the Media Leaders 50 Black Women Game Changers of Media, 2024 Campaigns IPA iList, 2023 Media Week 30 under 30, the Media Leader Future 100 Club, in 2022 Advertising Associations BRIM Changemaker. Wow, Mercy welcome. It's lovely to have you with us.

Mercy (03:27)

Thanks so much. Every time I hear that back, I'm like, that's a lot of stuff. We've got a lot of stuff.

Dom (03:36)

It is a lot of stuff. It would be great to start to pull out some of the things that you've learned in doing that. I know one of the things that you're very passionate about and have built your career around really is advocating for the power and the value of mentoring. And that's something we're particularly interested in in terms of internal communication in the IOIC. In fact, as we go, as we record this, we're currently recruiting again for more mentors to support younger people in the early phases of their career.

But I guess what would be really good is to start by understanding your personal journey and how you came into this. So a big question, Mercy, but it'd be good to hear your story.



Mercy (04:08)

Oh, I would love to share and thanks for having me. And when it comes to mentorship, **I keep saying the one line of I wouldn't be where I am in my career without mentorship.** And that's because I'm a COVID graduate. So I graduated in 2020. I had plans to travel as soon as I graduated and just almost like never come back. I'll like, oh, I'll go out there and just see what happens. And then obviously COVID happened March 2020, everything was shut down. And I was like, we need to find a new plan because we, for the first time, I'm very type A for the first time had nothing set up and I was really just gonna lean into my type B energy and just you know see where the world takes me. The world gave me an answer and said you're gonna stay in Glasgow and that's what you're gonna do and you're gonna have to figure out from there and I remember just looking online after virtually graduating I've just been like what do I do? I knew I wanted to do marketing I studied international business with marketing university but it's one of those industries where it's like there's no path like there's no clear route to really see where you can go and how you can enter into the industry and that was my challenge that I faced up front. I had no connections, I have a wonderful family but I also have two older sisters, one's a lawyer, one's a doctor and then there was me. So there was really no one to help guide me into this pathway until I ended up finding a mentorship programme through an organisation called Home from College and they were actually US based and that is where I found my first ever mentor. I signed up for this programme not having a clue if they even opened it to global candidates.

But I was like, let's see what happens. Everything's virtual and everything has to be online. And I was actually one of the 7 % of the candidates that applied for it to get a mentor. And my mentor is amazing. And I got from that program, his name is Hugh Thomas, and he's an entrepreneur and he was living in New York at the time. And the way the mentorship programme was set up was that they paired people from the 2008 recession with people who graduated during COVID. So they were like, if this crisis could graduate and make a career of themselves, they can help the next crisis, make a career of themselves. And it was very, very interesting because he was like, listen, I've been through something before where the whole kind of world at the time, from a financial standpoint was just like, we don't know what to do. And that's kind of what this is giving, obviously, different circumstances, but one big crisis to another, you've got this. And he followed through very, very quickly. A wonderful man. But I think for great context, he is a white man. Just kind of all of the things that essentially the world works for him and the best way possible and he's a great person so love it for him. However, he was very open to that because at the same time it was the



resurgence of Black Lives Matter and all of these things that were happening societally and I remember telling him the one line that I told him was that I just want to go somewhere that cares. Like I want to be hired, I want to be employed but I want to go somewhere that cares and he ended up connecting me with someone he went to university with who was running a diversity inclusion consultancy and I wanted to get into marketing so I said why are you bringing this across my desk? Like what is going on here? But then we talked about it a bit more and he was like just have a conversation with the boss, like see what he says and he's a great guy and you want to go somewhere that cares and they do really good work that shows a lot of care and I said okay. So I had a conversation with him and he ended up being my first ever boss and that led me to my first ever job and it was such a great conversation.

I remember just sitting in my bedroom and just having a chat about what they do in the world of diversity and inclusion. And it was actually a lot more closely linked to marketing than I ever thought. They worked on campaigns and kind of external communications, but also the internal side, like internal communications and policies and things like that. And I stayed with them for over two years, building a pipeline all the way from intern when I joined them two weeks after that call with the boss. And then it grew all the way, a pipeline to inclusion consultant in just about two years and I think that was like such an eye-opening moment for me because I was like it provides different routes to what you might think you want to do but you don't know how you're gonna get there and I learned so much. I learned so much when it came to insights, audience understanding, communities, inclusion and I worked with global brands from Unilever and Coca-Cola, I worked with governmental departments and I wouldn't have had access to all of that if it wasn't for my very first mentor and after that I became a bit of a serial mentee and I was like, get me on every programme possible. I want to learn. had this deep, deep yearning for learning and it ended up having me lead to another further three incredible formal mentors. My next mentor was amazing. She worked at Prime Video at the time and she helped me actually get to a point where she was like, you talk a lot and I feel like you should do something with that. And it grew into my Gen Z careers podcast which is called Audacity Wee. And we had a really great time kind of workshopping that. And she gave me the confidence to push forward with that. And that then led me to my next job because when I was posting content about this podcast, my next employer was like, hey, who are you? I'm seeing all this content. Let's have a chat. And I ended up, you know, getting a job within that agency, which was incredible. And then my next kind of mentor was more on the practical side, the logistical side. And she helped me get my biggest salary jump. And that was really, really important for me because I wanted to understand, I'm getting into these, more senior roles. How do I make sure I'm compensated well for them? And my kind of most recent formal mentor was through another program who helped me more on a personal side because I am a black woman in



the industry. I live in Scotland. I work across the UK. But it was how do I show up as my best self and how do I make sure my identity is my strong suit and not as a barrier for anything. And I never really thought that, but as you kind of get into certain rooms, you start feeling a little friction or shifts or something that is like you might not be as well prepared for. And she really helped me become more confident in my identity and how I show up in spaces and really embrace all of that. So **mentorship has been like such a cornerstone in my journey, which is why I'm so passionate about it**, because I'm like, all it is a bit of guidance. It doesn't need to be a formal mentor.

I have so many informal mentors, people who I'm just like, I can, send a message to or, or hit up for like, I am struggling with this or I'd like to sign board that. And it's all about guidance. And I think that's what's been missing for a while because everyone thinks it needs to be this big formal thing, but actually it's just a chat. It's just a conversation and learning on both sides as well.

Dom (10:36)

I've got a few things you were talking there. So it sounds like amongst lots of other things, mentors have given you important connections. They've helped you with relationships, which is always important. They've given you advice quite clearly. And they've also helped you build a personal confidence, I guess, and a personal approach and other things. I know we want to focus on how we help young people, if you like, their careers. But the whole thing about mentorship is also really important for internal communicators, because we know that we believe, sorry, our future as a profession is around building connection. And I think one of the most powerful ways we can build connection is through intergenerational relationships and that's through mentors. And I think also, even increasingly important, reverse mentors as well. It would be really useful just to pull out from what you've experienced what makes for a good mentor-mentee relationship, because I know it doesn't always work. What's your experience with that?

Mercy (11:277)

Yeah, no, I love this question because I think a lot of people really see it as senior to junior, and it's really just knowledge coming from senior to junior. And that's the relationship and that's it. But **mentorship is a dialogue and it's a two-way street**. And I remember my second mentor who was part of Prime Video at the time, her name is Joss Patterson. And I remember the conversations I was having with her and she was like, do you know, I'm



learning a lot from you. And I remember when I pitched my podcast to her Audacity We and I was like, yeah, I think it'll be really good for Gen Z's to get an understanding of what's happening in the industry and X, Y, Z and all of this kind of stuff. I be like, we just want to learn and we want to hear and get all this knowledge. She was like, okay, love that for you. But we also need to learn like us as senior leaders need to learn. And that's when the intergenerational piece started really showing up in my career. That was about what year two or three into my career where I started talking about intergenerational conversations then, because during these podcasts episodes that I had I was speaking I was kind of the Gen Z voice and primarily but I was speaking to all these different senior leaders and I would tell them a bit about like trending topics with Gen Z and that would lead the episode it was called the tea with Gen Z and and essentially we would talk about what is happening and how that's showing up in their organisations and they would be like wow like I guess that makes sense because I have a colleague that for example coming into the industry during and it's like when people move to hybrid model and coming into the industry or coming into the office rather it's like what are these water cooler chat moments everyone's talking about like what is this learning by osmosis like what do mean there's not a calendar invite for every single conversation that's to be had and it's just those type of learnings that happened I remember just being like oh this is a two-way street and Joss my mentor at the time really really instilled that in me and I remember her connecting with so many different people because she was like I think you're gonna get a lot from them but I think they're also gonna get a lot from you especially with a cohort of the workforce that came in at such an unprecedented time I went from a fully remote role my first job with the consultancy was fully remote they were London based and Glasgow based didn't see them until maybe like a year and a half into working with them that type of thing and then you have the transition into hybrid and some people now gone you know fully into and you full-time into the office and what's really interesting is and I imagine you kind of experienced this with some internal communications is like how do you shift someone who's fully worked fully remotely to working fully in an office and not have an internal communication process that takes them through that journey as to why this is important because someone like me I'd be like well I've got all my work done remotely so why should I be in the office and it's not like and a lot of people take it as that's just been them being stubborn or they're lazy or they don't want to be in the office or they this that whatever but it's actually like sorry if my norm coming into something is completely different from everyone else's norm then how do we make sure that everyone gets on the same page and learn why this is important if I'm given reasons as to why i need to be there absolutely like i'm sure that it will make a version of sense but i think it's just this assumption thing of like they're lazy they don't want to come into the office and i think that's such a shame because and I think that's such a shame because there's this level of misunderstanding and then people have their backs up and



then people then it's all this miscommunication and everyone starts getting a bit frosty with each other and then we end up in silos and then it's like, it's just a generational thing. That's just who they are. And it's just like, if we all just chatted and understood what was going on here, I'm pretty sure we'd be able to tease this out and be like oh the reason we want to do this is because of X, Y, and Z, and it will work because of A, B, and C, and everyone is on board. Great, cool, let's move forward. Obviously, there'll be more depth and nuance to conversations, but I think there's a lot of misunderstanding because people aren't open to learning both ways, and that's why I think reverse mentoring and mentoring, whichever way you want to look at it, it's just an ecosystem of learning between different levels of experience.

Cat Barnard (15:30)

You are so eloquent. And what I love about you, Mercy, is you've lived it. So you have kind of the battle scars of what it actually felt like to graduate into an abyss of goodness knows what, right? And what I'm struck by as you're talking is yes, it's about learning, but it's just about having a conversation. And I think one of the problems that we've got, I don't imagine it's a UK problem, but the media does love a trope, right? The media does love a caricature of, this person, that person, or the other person. And the fact, as you say, there is no one size fits all. And actually how restorative is that conversational bridge? Because if you can get where you need to get to in five, 10, 15 minutes, whereas all too often we sit in our silos and we go backwards and forwards on email, which is prone to a manner of misunderstanding anyway. Also, and I've got two kids, mine daughter's 21, my son's 19, but the way in which you communicate is very different because you were born into the advent of high speed, social media, the way in which sentences are structured, all of those things, everything is just so completely different. But I want to accentuate it's different. It doesn't mean it's right or it's wrong, it's just different. But if we sit with our differences and we don't move forward, then we are fundamentally nowhere. And I think tragically, our labour market data is pointing to some of this. As you were talking, I was thinking, can I be very clever and pull up some accurate data points on current state of affairs? I failed, so I'm just going to talk a bit more generically. But the last time I looked, which was only about seven, 10 days ago, UK neat figures, so not in education, employment or training. People between the ages of 16 and 25, so fundamentally any school-leaver, college-leaver or university-leaver.



That number is just shy of one million at this point in time. And there is other data that shows that graduate recruitment in particular has been impacted by employers who believe that entry-level work will be effectively done by algorithm. Good luck with that. I think that remains to be seen. Other data showing that finally, demand for apprenticeships and employers willing to offer apprenticeships is up on the up and up. But the whole picture for young people entering work for the first time is cloudy to say the least and concerning. And because you've been there, done it and you have grown this network and you've worked prolifically with young people to help them get access to what I like to call a wise elder. Whether that is always true remains to be seen, but I like to think of people of a certain age being a little bit wiser and a little bit willing to impart their pearls of wisdom and that two-way learning as you've described it. What is your experience of the challenges faced by young people. Is it as it is presented in the media or is it more complex than that?

Mercy (19:13)

Yeah, I think picking up on a few bits of what you said, I loved how you talked about lived experience and I think that's where it's really interesting with the data that you brought up and stuff. I would love for there to be more nuance in the insights and the research as to not only what are these figures and what are these numbers, but what's the actual lived experience? What is the feeling behind all of this and what are the characteristics that are coming up and all of these things to really get an understanding of, you can't really put such obvious numbers towards things when it's been such unprecedented times. Like it's been things where there should be a lot more conversation, a lot more qual data, a lot more nuance into that conversation. And I think that's once again where a lot of the misunderstanding comes from. So with the media and the tropes that have been put out. I was saying about Gen Z being lazy and there's no resilience. That was my favourite one. There's no resilience within Gen Z. And I'm like, I'm so sorry. Any Gen Z who has made it into any industry and got a job, I think that shows a level of resilience because how, how can you come into the workforce at a time when it's COVID, when workplaces didn't even know how to maintain the staff that they already had, nevermind open the doors to, to new staff. And if they were open the doors to new staff, that is going to look completely different in terms of having to build new systems or fully go online. And all of these things, I did my exams fully online, which was the first time the university, had to do something like that. So it's really interesting that Gen Z is matched with a lack of resilience when all we had to do was be resilient to make it through every next unprecedented step. As everyone else was figuring out, we had to figure out with them, like there was no path.



There was no sure way of doing anything, even if someone might have landed at a job, it might have gone away the next few months because people are like, that was a COVID job. And it's like, what's that even mean? So I think that's a trope that's been really interesting of **people blanketing a generation as having a lack of resilience** when in fact, I think it's the complete opposite when you actually sit down and talk to people about their journeys on making it through COVID.

That's also another reason as to why a lot of the programmes and the work we do with Who You Know isn't necessarily based on age, it's based on years of experience because a lot of people didn't traditionally enter industries at the time they were supposed to enter them because they might have not been able to get a job straight out of university. Some people went on to do a master's, some people went on to work in Tesco's for a couple of years because those were the jobs that were fully in demand and actually were given quite decent pay and steady pay as well.

I think another thing people think Gen Z are like just happy to go with the wind and see where life takes them but life took us through quite a route actually so a bit of you know steadiness is very welcome a bit of stability is very welcome which is actually a shared mindset that is typically put on boomers who are like they want things nice and steady there's a path to follow this and that and it might show up differently but actually Gen Z coming into a world of instability especially in the workforce, steadiness is a beautiful thing. It would be nice that as the chaos is happening around me, I know that I've got a paycheck coming in every month. That would be nice to know. And I think people don't put these things together because they're just very used to seeing Gen Z being online and Cat, like you were saying about, how we communicate and the world that we were brought into in the digital space. We were the very avid users of the digital space after it was introduced to the millennial audience, or the millennial generation but Gen Z were the ones that actively grew up with it. And then Gen Alpha, are the ones that are like engaging with it and developing it even further. But with that, it's very important to know that we might seem, have this level of bravado, if you will, or confidence, if you will. But we're actually just, not lazy, but loud. **We're a generation that just speaks our mind because we are giving the capacity to do that. We're given the platforms to do that. We're given the avenues to do that.** And then we're also given the audacity or allowed the audacity to do that. And I think that's what's different. A lot of generations have been speaking up. There has been resilience. There has been or resurgence of talking about issues, whatever platform that might have been in, but just because it's the digital age and the digital space is a lot more accessible, people are like, those lot talk a lot, they're doing so much. But it's like we just have an avenue to use it that other generations didn't, they probably would have done the same.



Cat Barnard (24:00)

So there's two things that I just want to say to that before I pass over to Jen. One is, you have as a generation an awful lot to speak up about because, and these are the bits that always get missed, right? You talk about wanting a steady paycheck and, or no, the trope that as a generation, Gen Z is flighty. I'm like, why would a generation that is locked out of the housing market due to in affordability, not be flighty. Like if you can't put down roots, what incentive is there for you to stay? That's one point that I want to make. And then, the other point is, which I think is a wonderful thing. And I, but I think it's again, really short-sighted when, when these tropes are presented in a very skewed way. Like, I'm a Gen-Xer and I know that Jen is a Gen-Xer and Dom I think you're a Gen-Xer probably, aren't you? But we were taught that children should be seen and not heard. We were kind of told to be polite to adults regardless of their proclivities and just be quiet. And so when we became parents ourselves, I think for the most part, we spurned that, children should be seen and not heard ideal and wanted our children to voice their opinions on the things that mattered to them. And yes, to some degree, there may be an overreach on that, but the fact of the matter is that we wanted things for our children that we didn't feel we got access to ourselves. And so therefore, if we have parented a generation of young adults who feel empowered to say their piece, that should be a good thing because that is redressing the balance of what we didn't get as a generation. And I think these things get missed a lot in this very targeted representation of all people of this or all people of that and looking for the negative bits rather than the really positive bits. I'm going to be quiet now because I'll get right on a soapbox but it does really boil my blood because we it was a pushback to an earlier age where the voice of children wasn't valued.

Mercy (26:27)

Mm-hmm. Yeah, no, and I think that's a really good point and I'm also like a firm believer in two things or multiple things can be true at once and I think from from your perspective in terms of wanting to almost correct that kind of what you're gonna instill in your children from what may have come from and whichever environments and people have been in that did teach them where it's like to you'd be seen not heard but it's great that you've got the point of view in terms of correcting that from your perspective and doing the opposite of that and allowing your children to have a voice. However, it's also important to consider that people are actually instilling the very same narrative to their own children. And that's why there are so many different perspectives that are happening. And that's why as well



with the digital age in terms of we right now have way more access to information and overload of access to information perspectives, point of views online and we're not as humans don't believe we're built to actually be able to have all of this knowledge or have all of these point of views and it's such an overflow of information happening across the world and some as that's why it gets me so intrigued maybe is the word as to why then wouldn't people speak up like why then wouldn't they like if you're if you're getting all of this overload of information from you know, TikTok Instagram, Twitter, Substack, whatever it is, all of these point of views, then it's like, wait, I feel like I need to say something about this because I know all of this or I'm hearing all of this. **Let me have my perspective on it. And that's why I was just saying around the whole thing about we're not, we're a loud generation because we almost have to be** like, we have all of this information thrown our way, then why wouldn't we say something? So that is just really interesting. **And that's why nuance is so important in terms of all of these different perspectives that exist.** And it's like, how do we use them? How do we utilise them? And also how do we take care of ourselves? Because it can be quite overwhelming. And I think that's why communication is so important and the core of everything that is done on my side and also **the work that you do is how do we appropriately communicate with people with the information that they need to know, but also transparency as well as to maybe if it's not full information that is ready to go** but just these checkpoints have been like, hey, this is what's happening or this might be what's coming up. Just want to make sure that you understand what's going on. Cool. We'll check back in, when we get to our next checkpoint. And I think it's that kind of like drip feed of information, especially in a workplace. Like we don't need to know all the inner workings at all times. Like we don't need to know all of that. But it is good to have it as a considered process of what's going on, especially when it is talking to a younger generation that is potentially very new to the scene, not really knowing how things operate and it's like, let's guide you through that versus throwing everything in the kitchen sink at them.

Jennifer Sproul (29:18)

Love that, Mercy. And I've just been sitting here intently listening to the chat so far. And there's so many things that you say that resonate with me, much of which that we've talked about. I mean, one of the things that resonates with me generally for our listeners as well and those working in internal communication and those that we're trying to attract to the profession is that **people want pathway and structure.** That's really hard to create. People really do want to know if I start here, where do I end up? Because I think when there's a world of chaos around us, we need control and we need to see where it's going. And I think



that's something that we get a lot at IOIC is, well, if I start here, what do I need to do there to get to here, to get to that? And we spend a lot of our time as well at IOIC going to universities. We've been doing BBC Bitesize. We've been doing other things. We're just going in, I think, social mobility charities and schools and sixth forms just to kind of explain what those options are and those pathways. So that was something that resonated with me.

A couple of other things that you said that really resonated with me as well is the power of relationships. They're really important, they're super powerful. The power of curiosity, which you clearly are and want to seek. And I do think that your point around the information overload that we exist in is something to be taken really seriously when designing communication and programmes as well. We need to be guardians of that or understanders of that, not just ones that add to it because it's the easiest way to do something rather than the right way to do something. I think sometimes we forget that for the sake of speed.

But one of things I wanted to pick up on and maybe expand a little bit more was I think what's really interesting was coming back to this point around pathways and this point around that the reverse mentoring, the guidance, the conversation piece, but then also this point around actually kind of old habits of the past or things that we've done in the past that actually need to be challenged and reconsidered in the way work is done in our environment. Because one of the things as you were talking about your journey at the very beginning about you didn't kind of I wanted to be marketing, I had this degree and then I had a mentor in conversation and then I realised if I did this, this, this and this, I would learn that xxx. And also by reverse mentoring, by the reverse element that comes naturally with with any relationship in that regard, is them to think differently or challenge assumptions. And because I don't know about you, when I start my career, even now you go to many meetings and you're like, that's just the way it's done around here. But why?

Mercy (32:00)

And that's what I was saying around kind of like, Gen Z and kind of younger generations have the audacity to be able to ask why, it's like, actually like, why should we use that process or have we considered another process or whatever it is? And I think it's gotten better with time because like you were saying Cat about the changing mindsets that have happened throughout generations that are now the leaders, the senior leaders in workplaces that will be open to that why.



It needs to go both ways. People can come with their ideas, they can come with their challenges to certain things in terms of challenging a way something has been done, but if it's not reciprocated with an open mind as to, that's actually really interesting or no, we haven't actually considered that is a way of humility is a very interesting word because I think it's riddled with a lot of cowering and not really allowing yourself to be the fullest best self that you can be. However, I do think there is levels of humility that should be embraced because it allows you to be like, wait, I don't have to be the smartest person in the room. One of the analogies I use in my workshops and keynotes is that, you know, especially within like a creative team or a team where communication is absolutely key is that you do want someone that is one of the TikTok natives, for example, that understands what's going on in the digital space. But you also want, the strategy veterans who understand how the world works. And therefore it's like getting the blend of those two worlds where it's like innovation that is happening over here and where the communication is happening with specifically younger audiences that we're trying to reach. But then also like the realities of what the structures are and the systems and how do we come together and put them in a room and to really blend together and create something that will not only serve the younger generation but everyone at large because four to five generations are working in the same place so we're gonna have to understand each other to some degree.

Jennifer Sproul (35:54)

And don't we all want to have a just a happy, whatever that feels, it's a personal choice. What feels good to me and good to you. We're relevant of our generation is just different because we're different humans, right? But don't we just want to feel like we're having a good life? Whatever a good life means to you.

Mercy (34:09)

Yeah, we spend so much of our life working. I think people would rather enjoy those, six to nine hours or whatever of work than having a miserable six to nine hours of work. And I think, it's that thing you said around, but that's just the way it is. Does it have to be like?

Jennifer Sproul (34:27)

It doesn't have to be. And I think that one of the things I was reflecting on as you were talking about job roles and titles and kind of the two-way piece as well is when



organisations, they need to reimagine and relearn and innovate and adapt. And also we have internal communicators listening in, kind of going, well, I need to make the employee experience or the internal communication experience work for rightly or wrongly generational segmentation marketing has been brought into practice, whether the use of the Gen Z Gen X millennial terminology to dictate and transcribe what you want versus what I want versus what they want is a good thing or a not thing. But let's say I think it's been baked into practices and we certainly use it at IOIC when we research and we try to look at differences. But also as well, there's this piece as well, what I find really difficult is **that we need to innovate the way we do things to meet the current and the future way of working that will encompass many generations or different generations of people coming through and we need to look at roles and the way we do things with a new mindset.** So how do we educate upwards? What I mean by that. So if I take internal communication as a discipline. It may struggle in some pockets where people that have been in the profession for a long time will go, well, we just sent this stuff out. And it's kind of like, well, actually, no, we need to understand how the workplace is changing and what the needs are to be about how do we evolutionize forward in differently to make a richer experience. And when I started in the workplace, it was like, well, you have meetings about that. But why? Why in that room? Is it really smart in that room? Why won't they let me in that room? Can't I add a view to that room? Wouldn't that make it more intelligent? Would that make it more great? And also is it about generational learning, but also I think it's personality learning and human learning and preferential learning.

Mercy (36:32)

I think you've hit it there in terms of like human learning. I think what is so interesting is that I have this analogy where it's like you have your ideal world and then you have your reality. And I think insight is really important when it comes to looking at this because your ideal is like where you want to get to and you're like, this is what it should be and this is what we should do. And it's all the all the shoulds, the kuddawuddashuddhas. Like that's what that world is. And listen, I too would love to live in the ideal world and where that is. But that's our north star, that's where we want to get to. We can't forget the reality and that's where we currently are. That's our you are here point, you know, on the map. And I think people negate reality because it's often, especially if you're doing an insights project, you're like, let's look at all the challenges. So it's riddled with all this negativity and it's really not a nice place that people want to stay in. But that's where the understanding comes from. We need to understand what the challenges are. We need to understand what's not going as well as we would want it to or what could be even better, but that stems from where the



challenges are and that's where the reality is. And a lot of people want to operate in the ideal world. No, we don't have issues on that. No, like we're all good people here. We're all like, and it's like all these hypotheticals, or they're like existing in very few pockets of whatever system you're in. Whereas the reality is where the actual insight is and the actual challenges are. And it's like, if we don't fix that, then we can't get to our idea.

We can't pretend the ideal is real. We have to work in reality and then move reality towards the ideal. And that's something that we do a lot in our workshops and intergenerational learning of being like, we need to take out the roots of all of these learnings that have happened over time. And I don't necessarily even believe in unlearning something. I believe in learning something new. And it's like, you have to then make the choice to follow that new learning. So for example, with Who You Know, like the very basis of its name is because it's a who you know industry, marketing, media, advertising, communications, it's very, everyone's like, it's who you know, it's all about who you know, like, so you know, you need to have connections, you need to have a net, you need to do this, you need to have an uncle that works there, all this kind of stuff. And I'm like.

Okay, cool. Then let's build the network. How do we get people to know who they need to know? Fine. Let's let's do that ourselves. Let's play in its face. Like instead of like pretending this challenge of it's a who you know, industry is this thing that we need to completely ignore it or like, so bad, we're not going to touch it. It's still going to be there. Someone is going to have an uncle that works in advertising or a mum that works in marketing or whatever it is. And that is completely fine. But how do we open that up and make sure that get to know who and I think mentorship that's why it's such a driver for who you know because with my career with people that I know connecting people to the right people is what is a quite a fast-track way and to get into whatever goal or whatever job or whatever next step you're looking for and I'm also a living breathing example **I believe in lived experience yes but I also believe in lived expertise and the learnings that you get from mentorship** and I say this you know now in my sixth year of my career that every job that I ever got, ever had, I never applied for. It's all been through connections. It's all been because I talked to someone who then connected me with someone else, or I put myself out there in the power of visibility and using accessible methods for myself that could put me out there into the job market and be like, hey, like I'm someone that you should be speaking to, or I'm someone that, you know, I'm from Glasgow and I was in my bedroom when I graduated and started coming into this job market and somehow was still seen because of the power of visibility, the power of connection, the power of all of that. I think that



is what people really are like. It's because it's intangible that they don't see how it can be almost real. But this is why I'm like, we need to look at those things where it's the challenges that feel like, it's just the way it is. Who you know industry is just the way it is. I need to do applications. It's the only route into jobs. That's just the way it is. I'm literally a living, breathing example of it's not just the way it is. **My career has been a series of side doors and I have never gone through the front door** and I've always had to find another route in and I've encouraged people to do the same but I also believe that takes a certain person and it doesn't have to be the same journey for everyone else which is why Unlocked and Who You Know has become what it was or what it is.

Because with Unlocked, my whole thing was like, I wanted it to create opportunities that were visible to people. And Unlocked was an internship programme that was for people from marginalised backgrounds, specifically those from marginalised ethnicities and those from low income backgrounds, to be able to see that marketing as a choice. Because I'm a prime candidate for Unlocked if I was coming into the industry when it started, because I didn't have any connections.

My East African background, marketing was not on the table for a pathway to take and my sisters, as I said, in medicine and law. And I just remember being like, it shouldn't be hard. Why is it hard? Can we understand why it's hard? And we did a lot of research around it, talking to people who had created their own pathways that also matched the criteria for the programme. Then that's why we were like, just remove the age cap. We're not going to have an age bracket. Why would we have an age bracket? Why is it that it's 16 to 25, why is it that it's 18 to 30? And we really started to kind of peel away at all of these, it's just because of way it is or whatever it is. like, yes, there's some practical reasons, grants, fundings, et cetera. But we were like, as an industry, how do we make this as accessible as possible? So we did away with things that were very much the standard, if you will. And we're like, we'll just play it the way that we want to play it and make it as accessible as possible.

We had people applying for the internship programme all the way into their 50s. We had people in their 30s towards their 40s as interns. And I think it's also a language thing, which was one of my specialisms when I did diversity and inclusion consulting, inclusive language. Internship in itself was riddled with young. It's just people assume young. And it's like, but why? It's just the first opportunity or it's just an opportunity where you can come in and see if this is something for you. What if you're doing a career shift? We had someone that was a chef turned into an accountant or into account management. it's just like, if they weren't able to get that opportunity, then they wouldn't have been able to get to the role that they're in now. And I think that's, get so passionate about it just because I'm like, why is it so hard to get into certain industries when there can be pathways that are created. And I



remember, in the third cycle of Unlocked, there was an article that went out written by one of our partners who had just promoted their intern to an account manager. **And they said that Unlocked has now become a clear structural pathway for the marketing industry.** And that line, I'm like, I'm gonna print it out, frame it, put it on the wall, because that's all it was.

Jennifer Sproul (43:43)

I love that!

Mercy (43:44)

I was like, I just wanted someone to not have to say, I stumbled into marketing. I want someone to be able to be like, can't. Every single time.

Jennifer Sproul (43:51)

We have the same feeling about internal communication. We hear that every way. And it's something that I always say, I share that passion and I wish that.

And also, it's also internal communicators who've been senior as well or working is to listen into that generation. And how do I need to change the way I'm creating pathways and development and opportunity to bring freshness and perspective and challenge? And I think that one of the things that I'm listening and I think I'm passing to Cat next, but one of the things that you were talking when I'm thinking about a question of what are the defining traits of a Gen Z in the workplace? I think you've described them really well and I think for me if I can just play back what it's not about describing you as a generation as necessarily you have traits but it's about understanding how we move forward into a space that's real, that asks the why, that creates innovation, that creates conversation, and actually the power of storytelling in how we think differently and how we can, we just want a reality. We want to live in a real world and we want to see stability and opportunity. And I think that as you say that, and we look at the way organisations design their communication practices, and I don't just mean like sending stuff out, about how we create that connected environment that allows that to thrive. I think there's an awful lot that if we all just listen to what your perspective, this perspective, to get the who, what, where, why, just the collectivism to go, let's make this feel real and grounded in something that I can actually make a difference and ditch. Well, that's just the way we do it.



Mercy (45:24)

Mm-hmm. And I think what you said about storytelling literally like itched the right part of my brain. I was like, yes, this is like the core of everything. Just storytelling and what you were saying is such an important part of everything. Think about, the worlds that you want to dive into when you read a book or when you watch a TV series or your favourite film. It's like the art of storytelling that really draws people in and can really change emotions and behaviours. And I think that it's very interesting in the world of communication that we kind of we can do that very well for our clients. But it's actually quite a struggle to do it for ourselves. And I feel like that's such an important driver in people being able to create opportunity for themselves and then for the industries and themselves to create opportunity for others in terms of you've probably got incredible stories with it. I'm working with a client at the moment that we're designing something for workshops and it's like they were telling me all of these incredible journeys of employees that they have and how they got into the industry and you know they've gotten feedback in terms of like don't have a certain degree or qualification when people apply for jobs and they think the job isn't for them. But then you have all of these stories of people who have never went to university are now in a senior level of leadership and it's like, sorry if you just maybe told that person to tell their story and whatever kind of method works for them, I think you would have a lot more better chance of recruiting really exciting people who may stop, not even fall on the first hurdle, they'll stop because they're like, that's a barrier, I can't do this and I think just kind of closing this part up in terms of storytelling, it's about removing those barriers and removing, you know, being like, OK, how do we make sure that we show this is for you? And that's what the internship program has done. That's what who you know has done. Removing barriers like does there need to be age brackets? How do we make this more accessible in terms of Scotland, even, for example, where there isn't necessarily as much visible opportunity as other parts of the UK? And so it's just, yeah, I hope people lean in that a lot more in terms of storytelling, removing of these barriers and just challenging it. **I think that's like the core right now as well, like challenging it, challenging it, asking the whys and making sure that you're like does it have to be this way and if not what can we do with it because that's where the opportunity lies. It's so exciting.**

Cat Barnard (45:42)

Well, do you know what? You blow my mind. I've got so much that I could say, but we would be on this podcast for at least a couple of hours. And I know that we don't want to do that.



But one thing I will say, and then I'm going to pass to Dom very quickly, **the need for curiosity and the need for creative thinking has never, ever been more urgent** because pretty much every single job that goes on in an office place right now is going to get deconstructed and reconstructed as we learn how to integrate AI, generative AI into workflows. And actually we are only going to be able to learn to do that through conversations and we are only going to be able to do it through intergenerational conversations because some of the oldest people at work will be the last generation standing that were involved in business process design and redesign. And you guys, coming into the workplace with fresh eyes and fresh ideas are best placed to say, why would you do things like that, et cetera? But then weaving that thread of storytelling through the whole piece, I'm teasing this up now for you, Dom, plays into the sweet spot of internal communication. So I love how you have set the scene for the proliferation of intergenerational conversations. There is nothing to dislike about this. And actually the more intergenerational ways of working get woven into all our workplaces. I think the happier and more progressed we're going to be, but all of that to say, Dom, I know that you'll want to tie this back to internal comms in some way, shape or form. So I'm going to pass the mic.

Dom (49:37)

Thank you, thank you, Cat. I suppose we do have to come into land because as you pointed out, I am just about in generation X, which means it's rapidly getting time for my afternoon nap. So we do need to come to some sort of conclusion. But Mercy, look, fantastic things that you've been saying. Cat and Jen have both pulled out some great things as well. But for me, I think I love the phrase you used at the start about establishing an ecosystem of learning. I thought that was brilliant, particularly as it can be driven by conversation and connection. I think that's a really useful thing.

I've also really brought out the whole point about nuance, which we thought about but not in this way. What I took from that is we can use nuance through conversation to debunk myths or to clarify things or to put evidence behind things. That's a really interesting way of putting it. I also like the fact that you said no Gen Z person now who's in a job can be accused of being lazy because they have to do some stuff to get it, have to work hard to get it. I also took about using audacity as a corporate resource point you were having the conversation particularly with Jen about, about how do you ask questions and challenge things. think Jen is in a great position to do that. Of course, other generations have to respond to that in the right way as well. And the last thing, I had many things I just wanted to pull out was a great thing. I hadn't really thought about this before, but you talked about



establishing side doors, not just front doors to professionals and careers. And I think that's a great thing because that reinforces the whole point of networks. So look, to finish as you say, we are around internal communication. Our listeners are very much involved in internal communication and things related to it. We know that internal communication will exist and prosper if we can show that we can help organisations perform better. One of the ways in which we can do that is by helping organisations succeed in navigating what is a very confusing labour market. So, putting together what we've discussed, Mercy, what advice would you give internal communicators about what they should be doing to help their organisations thrive in that market, in that labour market. Big question I know, but what are your thoughts?

Mercy (51:37)

Yeah, here to solve all your problems. Well, I think what we kind of were saying throughout this entire conversation is that there is an overload of information, like in society in general, but also in workplaces. And an understanding piece is the most important of understanding how all of the different workers operate. And it's not, again, to kind of Jen, what you were mentioning about those kind of generational marketing aspects. Like those things that it just come out of anywhere like that came from a reasoning of something.

However, like I was saying around there's multiple things can be true. I think it's important to acknowledge that there are different generations that will operate a little bit differently from each other and understanding that is very important. However, it's then understanding then what is the umbrella across everything that we can get to a place that we bring everyone on the journey, not bring in the different silos in like in their cohorts on the journey. How do we bring everyone along? Consider what all these, different minds sets require to be able to understand, okay, whether there's a big change coming up, whether there's a restructure coming up, this is why it's important and this is how it may affect some people differently. Is it affecting parents or is it affecting people who are needing accessibility? Like, considering all of these different factors of what makes your hopefully wonderful workforce what they are, **it's understanding the piece of their challenges and then finding way to communicate how to bring them all on the journey versus individually on the journey.** I think there's a really great book called The Invisible Woman that explains that really well where you when you cater to the most marginalised, whichever way that shows up, when you cater to the most marginalised, you cater to everyone. And if you think about, know, for example, when there's like a dip in the curve and a lot of people think, that's really great for a wheelchair user, or they think that's really great for someone who's pushing a pram, or honestly, it's really great for when your trolley just needs to not bash off



the curb and you're able to get from point A to B a lot more smoothly. And when you have then catered for the most marginalised, then therefore you can cater to all and it will solve multiple problems instead of one problem. **So we want to solve, for the greater size of the workforce versus these individual pockets, which that means some people are at different stages of the journey that you're trying to bring them on.** So, yeah, I think that understanding piece is really important, getting to understand all the different challenges that can impact. So you've got your numbers, you've got, you know, hopefully an understanding of what the makeup of your workforce is. **So then you need to get that lived experience, but also that lived expertise from people who are then making whatever policies or whatever communications that need to be put out, really get to an understanding of, what would be the challenges that this person would face or the next person or the next person? And then when it's ready to put it out, make sure that's done in a considered way that showcases that you're being transparent as to what is going on.**

If there's a little, this might take a little longer, you communicate that, also ensure like, give them assurance, be like, okay, this is how we're approaching this and having it in that way. So from understanding all the way through to considered communications is what I would recommend.

Dom (54:46)

What great recommendation it is. I love that phrase about if you deal with the most marginalised you support everybody which is a fantastic way I think to bring this to a conclusion. Mercy thank you very much for lots of great insights and we look forward to speaking to you again. Thank you very much for joining us.

Mercy (54:59)

Thank you for having me.

Jennifer Sproul (55:01)

Thanks, Mercy.