

# Article 19 – Episode 8 – A 360° Approach to Accessibility

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Expression is one of the most powerful tools we have. A voice, a pen, a keyboard.

The real change which must give to people throughout the world, their human rights, must come about in the hearts of people. We must want our fellow human beings to have rights and freedoms which give them dignity.

Article 19 is the voice in the room.

Marty:

Hello and welcome to Article 19. My name is Marty Molloy, chief of staff and catalyst at Tamman and I'm the host of our conversation today. I am so excited for our guest, Janet Fiore. Janet is the president and CEO of the Sierra Group, an award winning female owned company that trains over 6,500 corporate professionals annually. As a speaker and consultative trainer, Janet creates and delivers coursework for individuals with multiple severe disabilities and for the business professionals who recruit, hire and accommodate them. She has provided media input and testimony for Congress. She is a social entrepreneur who has combined her business and rehabilitation piece, along with her own professional and personal accommodation experiences in order to drive up employment success for all of her customers. Janet's driving mantra, to make a significant noticeable difference in the lives of people we work with, and to do this every day we set that out to find at least one more way to drive up employment for Americans with disabilities. I am thrilled that my friend and my colleague and you're going to learn all about that, Janet is with us today. Real quick fake fact about Janet, she owns the second largest collection of mini-golf or putt-putt pencils in the world. As usual, along with Janet, we have my co-host Amanda Roper, program manager of Tamman's accessibility initiatives. Hi Amanda.

Amanda:

Hey Marty.

Marty:

And of course, Tamman's head honcho, Michael Mangos, CEO and co-founder of Tamman, Mr. Mangos, hello.

Michael:

Hey Marty and welcome Janet.

Janet:

Thanks Mike.

Marty: Before we begin, I'd like to set the stage for our listeners that our conversation is borne today from a decision at Tamman to state clearly and plainly

that access to information is a human right. The developers and designers at Tamman work hard to make sure that no matter use constraint a user may have, be it due to a temporary, situational or permanent condition or disability, that they will be able to access the information designed and built by Tamman. This podcast is a call for others to join in a bigger conversation with us. We work to build the inclusive web. To do that we need all of us, working together and learning together. Thank you so much for listening and let's get this conversation started. I'd like to officially bring in Janet, my friend. How are you today?

Janet:

I'm doing great Marty, thank you. Rainy day but this is a fun way to spend some time.

Marty:

Absolutely, I always love talking with you so I can't wait for where we're going to go today. We are recording at the end of a long work day so we like to start off with a nice and easy question. For all three of you, but I will start with Janet, you could choose to be any animal on earth but for only 24 hours, which animal are you going to choose, Janet?

00:03:10

Janet:

That's easy, Marty. I would be my dog. Dogs have a great life and I personally think my dog Timmy has the best life ever.

Marty:

What about you Amanda? What are you gonna be for 24 hours?

Amanda:

I would be a bird and fly as far as I can for 24 hours and then at the end of the day, poof back to the start. Why not?

Marty:

It might be a long walk home. But yes.

Amanda:

Wouldn't we—I would trance. I'd automatically get put back to where I started is how I picture this. Either way.

Marty:

I can dig it. Mr. Mangos, I know we're gonna get something weird like a liger or something I'm imagining but go ahead.

Michael:

Literally this is my seven year old's favorite question to ask me every night before I go to bed, what animal do I want to be for a day. I change it up every night. Two

nights ago it was a liger, no joke but last night my answer was an octopus. I think I will hold that answer through til tonight. I will be an octopus for a day.

Marty:

That's a fantastic—working with you and next to you, you are like an octopus. I don't know how you handle, without eight arms, how you handle and juggle all the things that you have going on, exactly.

Janet:

I want to change my answer. I'd like to be a gazelle. Saying that I want to be my dog makes me sound lazy compared to Mike. [laughter] maybe a gazelle but it sounds more elegant and—

Marty:

It's a very, it suits you. It is very elegant, and you move quickly. I've seen that so that's awesome.

Janet:

I'd still really rather be my dog.

Amanda:

Marty, how about you? What animal would you be?

Marty:

I am, it's trite but I'd have to go with a dolphin. I just want to experience that playful side and swim all the way down deep into the depths. Or a blue whale but they're kind of along the same lines, just to be that giant and in the ocean would be amazing for me. Let's jump into our next segment. This is really about you Janet, as I mentioned I'm really excited that you're here. I'd like you though to introduce yourself. Tell us and orient the listeners to who you are and what it is that you do.

Janet:

Thank you. I have spent the last 25 plus years of my life working in an industry committed to accommodating welcoming in and helping people with disabilities succeed at whatever career they happen to choose. I started this line of work out of, I would say a frustration at the career path I thought I would go down. I originally thought I would go to college, get a four year degree in liberal studies and then probably go to law school. I was particularly interested in becoming an employment lawyer but right out of college, I got a job at a law firm and then I got a job at a couple of other law firms and I realize billable hours and working with problems and legal issues all day every day was not quite everything that I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. I did however love the concept of employment law. Always loved technology. I was a techno geek from the time I was a really little girl. My older brother was in the military and he's 13 or 14 years older than. He got out of the military, he was in electronics back then. He had a fox machine that he showed me at his job, which was next to the huge punch card computer that he was responsible for maintaining. I was hooked. How in the world does this piece of paper go in that machine and come out on someone else's phone. I

became hooked on technology at that point. Basically I didn't know what I was gonna do with my life and along came this.

00:06:51

Marty:

That's fantastic. We have been working together for almost a year now. I can't believe that it's that, as we've been figuring out ways in which the Sierra Group and Tamman can have more of an impact in the world. One of things, as I thought about you coming on to the podcast today is that I had never kind of heard Sierra Group's origin story. Can you tell us a little bit about the early days of the Sierra Group and really how you became the national expert that you are?

Janet:

That's an interesting journey, how much time do we have?

Marty:

As much time as you need.

Janet:

I started my career as I said, I thought I was gonna go to law school so I got a job as a paralegal and that was going to be the way to go to law school at night. The work that I enjoyed was on cases where somebody that had become disabled, maybe from an accident, maybe there was negligence involved. An individual who had lost the ability to do something yet through technology and money, we can help a person who became quadriplegic in a car accident get a van that had hand controls. That was a scenario that actually I'd seen in place with my college roommate's brother, somebody who had a terrible accident but technology gave back some ability to do his job. Literally I was working in Pittsburgh at a law firm, that's my home town, loving my job, helping manage a litigation team where part of the job was finding ways to mitigate the loss through things like technology. I was pretty much happy and thought I had my career set for a while when, well I accidentally fell in love and moved to Philadelphia. Not that Philadelphia was an accident however once I got to Philly, I was not happy working in a paralegal role anymore. It had lost the magic of being part of a team that was really creative and innovative. It became just a job. I went to work for Aetna Insurance, handling commercial liability claims for catastrophic loss. Again, I'm helping mitigate what a person was unable to do through researching and finding technology, really assistive technology to give people back as much ability as they could have. That was where my passion kind of came in and my wide-eyed child love of all things technology, I found a device called the Butler in a Box which was the early rendition of Alexa. You could've named him Alexa but we called him Alexander, and you said, Alexander, television on please. Alexander, lights. It was home automation. \$10,000 for that device. I was selling them to high end contractors or trying to find ways that the same voice activation could help people with quadriplegia and other disabilities. Yes, I had my own Butler in a Box. You didn't know that, did you Marty?

00:10:04

Marty:

No, I had no idea and the magic of the internet allowed me to find a link to Butler in the Box on a website right away. It's amazing, it's amazing to me. I had no idea that there was that kind of—

Michael:

Can I just say Marty, that I've had so many conversations with you. You and I have had some work time together and some social time together. It never ceases to amaze me that every time we talk, I learn something new about you. That's great.

Janet:

I still have the Butler but I've lost the password so Mike, maybe you can break the code and we can have our \$10,000, 1990s Butler or wait—I'll just go to Alexa.

Michael:

That sounds like a throw down. I feel like I have to crack it now.

Janet: Exactly.

Marty:

That's so amazing. Janet, I'm curious and you sort of begun to allude some of these personal stories that meant so much to you in your early part of your career. I'm wondering as you think about some of the specific moments or clients in your career, is there any situation or someone who really stands out that holds a special place in your memory?

Janet:

Yes, Marty. Thanks. In fact, there are two people that come to mind that I want to call out specifically, two individuals that helped shape my early career and really lead to everything I do today. First I learned from a mentor back at the law firm where I was working, this mentor was next door neighbors to a woman whose husband ran the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation years ago. She sat me down over homemade cookies and coffee and said, Janet, this technology that you're interested in promoting for people with disabilities, you need to get yourself a contract with the public program of vocational rehabilitation. That's where people can pay you for your expertise and your services. I was a young, hungry entrepreneur, literally hungry. I was on it. I drove to the meeting and I got the very first assistive technology vendor agreement that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania' OVR had ever given out. They gave it to me without even any background, any paperwork. It was a fee for service line item. I found out later they didn't know what AT was, and they didn't think it was really going to take hold. They bypassed all the extra effort for about a year and a half until they figured out everybody wanted to use assistive technology centers and it was for one simple reason. The Rehab Act had been reauthorize in 1992 to state, people with the most severe disability have to be served first to be able to go to work. That meant there's one way for a person who's quadriplegic to be able to maybe learn to become a computer programmer or do a job as claims adjudicator for an insurance

company. That one way to do it is adaptive technology. I met my mentor in the rehabilitation field, a gentleman who was in charge of one third of the country for the voc rehab program. He said, come sit with me and learn about the public program of voc rehab because you, young lady, I was young back then. You, young lady, have the answer to the future of people with severe disabilities going to work. Earlier this week, I had a wonderful catch up call with Dr. Ralph Passanelli [ph] a legend in the VR system. We were talking about the fact that this program is now 100 years old and all the evolution of taking people with the most severe disabilities first and accommodating them and helping them get skills to go to work. I was hooked. It was through that OVR referral process that we met a woman with muscular dystrophy. Her first name was Colleen and she was working for US Healthcare out in Blue Bell. US Healthcare was about to be bought by Aetna. Colleen was in fear of losing her job because this 17 claim per day limit, she had to process, was being raised by the new company to 19 claims. It was happenstance that all of that occurred within our district, I was in King of Prussia at the time. Along comes a woman in Blue Bell who needs adaptive technology in order to be able to keep her job with a huge company. Back in that time frame, Aetna was doing liability claims and—they were a different organization than they've become today but we went ahead, observed her at her job, got her a combination of a stylus input keyboard called the Magic Wand. They used to name things really crazy back then. We've got a Butler in a Box and a Magic Wand and Dragon Dictate to speak to the computer. The Dragon software is still a speech to text, still in place today. You don't see a lot of Magic Wand keyboards but it was magical that we can take her input from ten words a minute and she was losing some other physical ability due to muscular dystrophy, get her up to 45 to 55 words per minute, make her more comfortable, give her an ergonomic set up so that her body felt good and she had the devices to not just keep her job but ultimately maintain a career.

00:16:06

Marty:

That's an amazing story. Pulling all those pieces together I think speaks exactly why from the very first time we talked with you where you're like, this is someone who has the values and has the mission that we want to be a part of. I am curious, and this is sort of a technical piece. I don't know if you have a good answer for it or not but when you say that part of the mission was to serve those with the most severe disabilities first, how did they determine that? That's placing a pretty tough judgement on someone when you're trying to factor in their seriousness. I think about it in the digital accessibility space now where is there a time when if someone is blind and interacting with a site, is more important than someone who is deaf and interacting with a site. If these things don't line up, how do you make some of those hard decisions about severity levels of disability?

Janet:

That is answered through a rather complex formula used by the VR program to determine the order of selection and the degree of disability. Typically it's three or more severe disabilities. Someone with blindness, that's one disability. They may have an underlying heart condition, which is another and there may be another

mental health diagnosis that adds up. That's nothing that we decide. It's unfortunately—I say this unfortunately, it's excellent that the public VR program helps those that need the help the most, I love that and bring on the tough scenario and let us get creative and find the AT. That's what I do for a living but funding from the government surprise, surprise, there's a limit to how much is out there. The money follows those with the most severe disabilities first. Then if there's any money left over, it would go down to two disabilities or one. Unfortunately in the years I've been doing this work, it's always those with the most severe disability, multiple, that get the VR service to help them. The good news is, corporations like Aetna where Colleen ultimately went into to work, they saw the light and they started hiring Sierra Group as well as others to accommodate their whole work force. We literally got our first big corporate consulting gig from that Pennsylvania VR referral because when the National Ergonomic manager for Aetna read the report to authorize purchase of these devices for their employee down in Blue Bell, she picked up the phone and called me and said, I'm glad you answered because what I'm reading, I didn't know any of this existed. Can you please come to Hartford and meet with my team and tell us what else do we not know is out there than can make a worker with a severe disability able to continue their job. If we can do that for Colleen, what can we be doing for our other employees that might be struggling. It was the match made in heaven to begin the corporate outreach to what is actually possible.

00:19:19

Michael:

Janet, I have a question for you, sort of riffing on what you were just talking about because it kind of sparked a thought in my head. In your experience do you think that the program of serving people with the most need opened up the doors for companies to consider the possibility that people with only maybe one or two disabilities also could be served? Did it sort of pull the doors on that thinking or did it really double down on the idea that someone with a disability has to be so disabled that—did it create a chasm? Cuz I think it could go either way, right?

Janet:

You're absolutely right, Mike. One of my other mentors, a gentleman named Skip was working at Unum Provident when I was doing this project work with Aetna. I met him through some other channels. He said to me, Janet, he was the International Return to Work manager for Unum. He said Janet, how can you expect a company to know how to accommodate Colleen with muscular dystrophy and all of these severe disabilities when we can't get our own workers back from comp into the desk, getting the job done? Through Skip and Mary at Aetna and my company, we started brainstorming. We had to find a way to bridge that chasm. We figured that the best way to do it was to simultaneously work the most severe disability end of the spectrum and promote that ability. It was newsworthy. It was making stories. People were making headlines; can you believe this can happen. From that, the other end of the spectrum, the return to work, stay at work campaigns within organizations, Aetna included were born. If you can do this for

Colleen, what can you do to help our folks not get carpal tunnel in the first place or come back to work with a minor accommodation if they do.

00:21:14

Michael:

Interesting. It sounds like you were able to ninjutsu that around and kind of turn it into a way for companies to see possibility rather than creating a definition that separated people with disability from the regular work force. That's great. I'm encouraged to hear that.

Janet:

I actually thought back to an early brochure we designed. Back in the day when you had a paper brochure, no such thing as a website back in these days. Literally. It was shaped like a cut out of a door and our opening line was "opening the doors to possibility."

Michael:

That's cool.

Marty:

Yes, that's excellent.

Janet:

We've come a ways now with the digital side of things but those same digital opportunities of everything but everything being electronic on the internet, those have created some other new barriers to the ADA and inclusion, things that catalysts, that brought me into the world of Tamman.

Marty:

Let's jump into that a little bit, I think. As you think about the next phase, we talked about the earlier phase but let's use—thinking about the next phase and what's next at the Sierra Group. Where are you focused? Where is it going to go?

Janet:

I love this question Marty, because I love it, because for years now, several years, I've been very aware that the ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act and the employment arm of the ADA were getting the least traction in changing the world. Companies know that reasonable accommodations need to be made if Colleen needs a Magic Wand keyboarding Dragon to do her job. That is common knowledge. However the technology, the website, the CRM, the databases, all the tools we use interactively, even the online media platforms that we're all using to talk to one another and have meetings. All of those need to be built with digital accessibility in mind. While I know it and I believe in it, I had one employee who passed away a couple of years ago who had expertise in the digital accessibility part of the equation. Accommodations are specific to a person. Digital accessibility, if that doesn't exist on your career site, how is someone like Colleen ever going to apply for a job to go to work at your company if she has a digital accessibility



barrier? I was seeking and focusing on how will draw in the expertise to my company to be able to marry this need with the recruitment, the human factors, the mindset opening, the help individuals get the jobs they need but systematically, the tech platform has to support it. That was when I met Mike Mangos and now the whole circle is complete.

00:24:20

Michael:

That's great. It's interesting to hear you talk about that Janet, cuz we've talked about this before but I'm routinely, I don't want to say amazed or surprised because I'm kind of expecting it now. But I routinely encounter people that say, well this application isn't facing the public so why does it need to be digitally accessible? It's an interesting point, right, because it's like, well because you know the half of the ADA focuses on employment and one to one accommodation's not going to make up all the digital gaps, right? Just having assistive input technologies or assistive reading out technologies, the applications that we make in software have to actually pair with those assistive tech, right. It doesn't work all by itself. But it's amazing how few people really understand that part of the law enough to know that they need to act on it or consider it when they're working on stuff. So yes I agree, the, what do we do on the public facing side of things and what you've always done with the accommodation side of things. They really do come together in a very interesting way. I think it's a part of the ADA that a lot of people that are responsible for creating tools or delivering tools to their workforce don't really understand.

Janet:

It's the lack of understanding and awareness, Mike. It's profound. A few months before I met you, I was dating someone in the IT industry, someone that ran a pretty progressive IT organization. I'm like, oh good, somebody's going to understand what I'm talking about. What are your views on digital accessibility and how do you work that in to your consultation with your clients. He's like, what are you talking about? I attempted, I thought OK, I can educate. I can give awareness to anyone. I expected him to take to the information like a duck to water. Really good guy, nice person who I really respect and have an ongoing friendship with. Really didn't see the dots lining up because it didn't feel to him like it was meeting the need of his customer. I'm like, there's this thing called the law and there is a movement in America for inclusion and you don't see the connect. He's like, I just don't really understand what you're talking about.

Michael:

It's fascinating.

Amanda:

Actually Janet you answered it. I was just curious to know what you thought of why digital accessibility has gotten left behind and why there is such a big gap in understanding. Is it just because business or are there other reasons there?

Janet:

I have an interesting answer to that, Amanda. Interesting in my mind. I think it's the use of lingo and acronyms in the world of people who are any type of technology designer, developer, web person. It took me a long time to understand all the words you guys at Tamman were using it. When people speak in industry lingo and that's how those who understand digital accessibility speak to one another, when they speak that way to HR representatives, recruiters or people like me that are trying to keep up, we're going, "huh? What are you talking about?" I really believe there's a gap between what an ordinary person who probably wants to do the right thing and probably desires inclusion, there's a gap between what they can mentally take in about the technology and it's need for accessibility and how we present that message. Keeping people from understanding the need. Until you see the need, and you feel it, and you go, ah we created it the wrong way and now all these people can't get in. That's a message that we have to work at getting out there.

00:27:58

Michael:

Janet, it's funny I hadn't really thought about it in those terms. I'm really happy you said that. I think you're right.

Janet:

A-1-1-y people, I don't even or is it A-11-y. I read that A-1-1-y and I said, ally. Oh OK, good. I work a lot with employee resource groups and allies are people that support the diversity group, whether they're a member or not. I'm like, they're into being allies. Then I found out how do you pronounce that word? That alone confuses me.

Amanda:

Ally.

Michael:

You were right, and that's the exact reason for it. There is a tech lingo and a tech jargon and this goes across industries for sure but when you're stuck in that jargon and you don't take the time to speak clearly and plainly no matter what your message is, you're going to be losing people and leaving them behind. I think that was a fantastic answer, Janet.

Janet:

I wanted to add to that, when it comes to lingo, I was trained by my lobbyist in DC to stop using acronyms at meetings with members of Congress when you're trying to promote more money for programs like the VR program. She said to me, do you realize that you just told that member of Congress who sits on appropriations three times, you talked about your membership in the NRA and Janet, I know you're talking about the National Rehabilitation Association but do you think he's thinking for some reason this woman is telling me about her fascination with guns. I'm like,

oh my God. She goes, I forbid you to ever speak in less than full words again. Nobody argues with a DC lobbyist. Nobody argues and wins.

Michael:

That's hysterical. I was say that, just as a support for your assessment there, for your viewpoint, there is a hubris to youth. Often technology is associated with youth and then there's another hubris that comes along with once you've understood complex technology. Like a developer or even a UX designer, there's a hubris that comes along with that as well and all of that gets expressed, it reminds me of that Saturday Night Live skit with the IT guy who'd run around and was frustrated with everybody in the entire company who couldn't do all the things themselves. That's really observant of you I think to point out but I do agree that it comes with a little more than just the acronyms. I think just changing the acronyms would pull more people into the conversation but I think it's the hubris that comes along with knowing how those things work, being the magician and— where what we do is magic for a lot of people, including Marty in fact because I rib him about that all the time. That what we do is magic to a lot of folks and sometimes we have to remember that the purpose of magic is not to hold it over other people's heads or to exclude them from a conversation but rather to bring them into spaces and we need to apply that same kind of thinking when we're making what we make, not just as sort of the theoretical abstract concept as a byproduct of what we do.

00:30:57

Janet:

Right, and Amanda, back to your answer, it's the story telling that goes the techy solution, the magic. If you tell a human story with your magic, people can buy into it and remember it and maybe give you a chance to work the magic.

Marty:

That's perfect. I'm going to end us there for this segment but I know Janet you are going to be coming back and continuing in some of those stories and helping to illuminate the magic through those stories. We expect you to be on this podcast many, many more times. But before you go, we ask all of our guests the same three questions. I want to ask you, are you ready for three questions?

Janet:

Sure.

Marty:

First one is, what is one personal accommodation that you make?

Janet:

To do my job each day?

Marty:

Whatever you want, it could be to do your job, it could be in your personal life, whatever you need, take it wherever you like.

Janet:

OK, I have a slight visual impairment. I use high contrast font colors as well as 14 point or greater font size on everything that I do. I also use memory accommodations, all day every day, in my personal life as well as my professional life.

Marty:

You inspired that question originally, by the way. I just want you to know that. The second question is what is something about the world that keeps you up at night?

Janet:

Marty, there is so much going on in the world that could keep me up all day and all night, every night for all of us, particularly in 2021. Coming out of a pandemic however I'm a woman of faith and I sleep like a baby every night. I give it up, I let go and I let God.

Marty:

Your final question is, what is one recommendation for a game, a book, a movie, a TV show, whatever you have for us. What are you going to share?

Janet:

That's an easy one because I'm an avid reader. I'm usually reading two or three books at a time. I just finished this morning, the Year of Yes, How to Dance it Out, Stand in the Sun and Be Your Own Person by Shonda Rhimes. Fabulous stories, so candid, on point, I can't imagine anyone not enjoying this book.

00:33:12

Marty:

That is a great recommendation. While I have not read that book yet, I have met Shonda Rhimes and spent some time with her. She is electric so I'm sure that I came through in her writing as well. She was a force from the minute she walked in to the minute she left. It was—I was tired and I didn't even do very much. She was a lot, which was wonderful and it was inspiring so I imagine that that's a pretty great book too.

Janet:

Wow.

Marty:

With that, I appreciate your time. I appreciate you. Thank you so much for spending a late afternoon with us, an early evening and I cannot wait to continue these conversations with you on future Article 19 podcasts.

Janet:

I can't wait to come back, thank you Marty and everyone at Tamman for the great work you guys do.

Michael:

Thanks Janet.

Amanda:

Thanks Janet

If you like what you heard today and want to explore more about digital accessibility, inclusivity or to schedule a time to talk with us, you can find the whole Tamman team at Tamman Inc dot com. That's T-A-M-M-A-N-I-N-C dot com or follow up on social media at Tamman Inc on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram or Facebook. We'll talk to you again next time.