

## Justin McElroy Pt.2 \_ Discover Stories Episode 64

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### **Jasper Chu** 0:46

Yeah. So when you first got into the journalism industry, what was your initial experience in the workplace?

### **Justin McElroy** 1:12

It was at the at the campus newspaper, it was great. You know, we were all sort of like misfits in one way or the other, and we bonded over that. And you know, when you're all trying to chase the dream and do the same thing at the same time, and you know, you're a collective and there's no authority. Worked really well. My first couple years, a few years in journalism proper, were a little bit of a struggle, in the sense that it's like, yeah, the, you know, a lot of managers thought that I was too, like, awkward and arrogant and that I needed to pay my dues more. Certainly I didn't have, you know, it's sort of the bedside manners or the frankly good looks that you know, help you for being a TV reporter as well, right? I didn't have the formal training because I learned from the campus newspaper as well. And, you know, you're going into newsrooms where there's established power structure. So instead of like, "Oh, we all join at the same time and we're all on the same team," You're trying to break in and form connections with people that already have their established dynamics. Yeah, and then you're, you know, you're the weirdo that knows too much and has bad eye contact and is too blunt with them when you think you're right. So it took time for me to, A, temper of that stuff, uh, B, it took me time to learn as much about local news stuff, so that I could do good work, right? And do work on the level of more senior people. So I could be like, Yeah, you should be able to judge my stuff. It's on the merits of the of the stuff. And C, you know, just the amount of time in any workplace where you get to know people a little bit more, and I could be more comfortable around them. And it was tough. But you know, it was, by the time that I moved to CBC, I had figured that

part out of it enough, and also I had done enough work in a professional setting and in BC that when I went to CBC, the managers there and the coworkers knew, like, this is Justin. Here are the things he is good at, yeah, the things he is not good at. We hired him for this whole package of things. And so there was a lot less misunderstandings at that point. And then, you know, a few years after that, I became public about the fact that I was autistic, this was also the thing I did not tell my coworkers or managers, yeah, at the time, for all sorts of reasons and but so it's not an issue now, but it certainly was back then.

**Jasper Chu 4:16**

Yeah, I can definitely relate to the fact about trying to be transparent with your employers, trying to tell them, "These are my limitations. These are what I can do." I've worked in a few part time jobs in my mostly under my dad, but when I was working for a pharmacy in Burnaby for seniors home during the COVID-19 pandemic, I wasn't really public with the fact I had autism either because I didn't want to, like, stress them out too much.

**Justin McElroy 4:46**

Some people get weird about it.

**Jasper Chu 4:48**

Yeah, exactly, exactly like, like I mentioned, there's still that stigma. You're not sure if you should or you should not. And just personally, in my experience, I fear that they'll go, "Oh, you asked too much."

**Justin McElroy 5:02**

But the way that I would, you know, the way that I would talk around it back then, is being like, "Look, these are the these are the sorts of stories that I'm really good at, and, you know, that I'm really good at, and the audience really likes, and they're this and this and this and this and these are the sorts of things that I'm not really good at. And you know, you've seen me not be good at those things. So let me do the good things, right?" Um, and, you know, it's a way to talk about it from a support-based way, um, that doesn't make people defensive, but still allows you to thrive. At least, that's how I sort of figured it out over time.

**Jasper Chu 5:48**

Yeah, fair. So actually, I want to ask, what has the situation been with other journalists? Or if you know any other journalists who are autistic, and what's the situation that they face?

**Justin McElroy 6:01**

I know a couple. You know there's some people also who you know, I suspect might be on the spectrum, you know, if you, if you look at the you know, the stats now, of you know, one in any, every X people in Canada, and you extrapolate that out, and you look around your own workforce within a province. But, you know, you don't want to pry, you want to respect people's privacy, you know? I go certainly, like it is, on one hand, like lots of work forces a challenge, you know, there are challenges and opportunities. It's a profession that does for the most, in most parts of it, require a lot of personal, you know, initiative, interaction with strangers, first impressions, introduction to new sensory experiences, all things that I do not like, right?

**Jasper Chu** 7:04

Same here, same here. [Laughs] Doing the interview was the one thing I always dreaded at BCIT, other than the pivoting. But, yeah, it's an inevitability in the industry. So I just grit my teeth.

**Justin McElroy** 7:15

And you know, once you do enough interviews, and you find a certain way of and I always went, it's like, I'm having a conversation.

**Jasper Chu** 7:22

Of course, of course.

**Justin McElroy** 7:24

But so there's a lot of things, there's a lot of things about the profession that can activate those anxiety stressors and in the brain, and that does make it difficult. On the other hand, sort of the core parts of journalism, of gathering the information, communicating it out, doing the same sort of tasks day to day. You know, fit with a lot of the you know, places where neurodiverse people can thrive, right? So, you know, there are opportunities, and you can see that in where people work, but it's also you don't want to paint too broad of a brush.

**Jasper Chu** 8:06

Yeah, that's fair. Anyways, when I was doing some research for this subject, I came across something really alarming in the 2017 Canadian survey on disability, those with autism age 20 to 64, only 33% reported being employed, compared to 79% without a disability. And the median yearly employment income for those with autism was \$2,000. 54% get reported getting their pay from municipal social assistance, welfare, Old Age Security, guaranteed income supplement, investment income, special support or tax credit scholarships. I want

to ask, what's your take being an employee at CBC and someone who identifies as having autism? What do you think is one of the major issues with autistic people facing employment? Or what do you think is one of the one of the really systemic issues with employers that have that show reluctance to hire people with autism?

**Justin McElroy 9:10**

You know, I think most workplaces are concerned about first impressions and the bottom line. And do you appear to initially to be an impediment for me to achieve those things relative to another person that I can hire. And when it comes down to, you know, those first few times where you're working, where it's like I am having difficulty with this task or this interaction with someone, it can be very easy for, you know, if there aren't regulations in place and your manager is, let's say, unsympathetic, to put it, maybe more kindly than it deserves for managers to not give autistic people opportunities, right? And you know that can be even if you're able to live your day to day life without with minimal outside supports, right? Because you know those first few things about getting a job and the interview and that first impression and learning the new systems, right? Are, you know, so trepidatious for a lot of folks. So, you know I understand the stats. When you say that to me, I'm not surprised. Does that make it, you know, good, or just? Of course not, but it shows the long way that we have to go in order to make sure that there are opportunities for people. I don't think of it as like you need to have a job to have self worth, but if you want to have a job, and whatever your setup is is such that you, know you need it to you know live the life that you need to then you know we need to do a better job to ensure that our workplaces are welcoming and accommodating and have systems in place that allow all folks to shine and to have the opportunity to do the stuff that they are good at.

**Jasper Chu 11:20**

And from your perspective, do you think that this issue is getting any better, getting any worse? Do you think we're making any progress in a good, positive direction, or you still, or you think it's we're really stagnant on the issue right now? There's not much discussion, because I listen to news media a lot. I don't really think news media does it a lot of justice, like, there's a lot of emphasis on LGBTQ issues, a lot of but when it comes to neurodiversity, I don't think it—and nothing against you. I don't think news media does it the same amount of justice, like, there's not a lot of coverage or awareness compared to maybe some other issues.

**Justin McElroy 12:00**

And I think you know it is hard because, you know, everyone is slightly different and and you know the array of different needs and desires for folks to be accepted are so different

based on one's own symptoms. And I think, you know, certainly from a policy position, from governments, you know, not a lot of has been done on this in the last five years or so either. But I do think, sort of on an individual understanding basis, within society, there's been huge strides, right? And you, know, you look at how people have voices now online to talk about their autism and to talk about how it affects them and or how they use it to navigate the world, and the things that they enjoy or don't enjoy that are partly a result of that, and there is so much of that conversation going on, and people can see that conversation, and people can think or laugh or cry and think about the people that they know in a way that is way larger than it was when I was a kid, right? Like if I, you know, when I had questions about, you know, why I felt that I was different when I was 15 years old. You know, the Internet, social media didn't exist, and the Internet was still extremely rudimentary, and to find other people and examples of, oh, they feel this exact same way about you know, loud noises or reading someone's facial expression, or when you know why it's fun to like, get super into one thing for a sustained period of time? Okay, that helps. You know, may have felt a little bit better about myself. That's there now, in a way that simply wasn't 15 years ago. And for other people as well that aren't autistic, but can, you know, see this stuff come up, or, you know, they suddenly, they have, you know, a son or a daughter or a friend or a cousin, and they learn they're on the spectrum, instead of just going, "Oh, well, that's interesting." And they might think maybe weird or different, or, I'm not quite sure how to deal with this. Now, there are so many more of those sorts of like soft resources available for them, and so they can go, "Alright, well, my friend's daughter is sort of like this person and that person, and this story that I've heard about, and this helps me create, sort of, you know, a system for understanding and empathizing with them a little bit better than than existed." So, you know, that's where I get lots of hope and understanding from.

**Jasper Chu** 15:04

What would you say to those who have autism and want to join the journalism industry? What would be some what would be your professional advice for them to get a leg into the industry?

**Justin McElroy** 15:14

You know, I would say to like, use, you know, use the strengths that you have, right? If there's issues that you're passionate about, if there's things you like really studying about, if there's types of stories that you're really drawn to, make make those your make those your strengths. Find ways to show to you know, editors and publications. Look, I can report the heck out of this. I know how to talk about this. I know how to find the sources and the data, and have interesting ways of bringing this information up that nobody else can, while

at the same time, you know, finding, you know, going through some of those steps, because you can't take for granted that organizations are going to do the you know, the heavy lifting of integration for you, right? As unfair as that may be, you know, we've all been in those situations. [Laughs]

**Jasper Chu** 16:08

Oh, yeah.

**Justin McElroy** 16:09

Like, I, for instance, like, I hate networking. I hated it. I hated it. I hated it so much because it's first impressions, and it's transactional, and I felt it's like, it's sucking up to someone for, you know, non-altruistic reasons, because I want something out of them. And then when do I ask for? When do I ask for the thing? How do I ask for the thing? I don't say like, give me a job, but I say, like, Do you how—I like this place? Is there some I had no clue, and I hate it. It was just bad, bad, bad. But then over time, I started went, "Okay, I've got to, like, I need to talk to people in the industry. I need to learn a little bit more or it's just not going to happen." So I got better at talking just asking people, you know, can we talk about journalism, or, "Hey, I'm an editor at this paper. Can we talk about, you know, can I show you a few of our issues, and you can tell me what you think of these stories, or how we've put together this stuff, or the mission of journalism." And then from there, that was sort of my gateway to learning, oh, this is how you talk to other journalists. And then you they ask about you, and you say, "Well, I'm, you know, I'd love to work for a newspaper. I'd love to work here." And then they might say, okay, like they keep that in their mind, and then they reach out to you and go, "Hey, there's this opportunity." I use that as one example, because that's the one that I most remember when I was starting out. But just thinking about, okay, what are one or two things that are tough and I really need to put a focus on but would be helpful for making that next step up. So one on the tougher end of things, and one on, maybe, you know, the easier, more potential end of things.

**Jasper Chu** 17:56

And one final question, what would be your advice going forward to employers who work with neurodiverse employees, what would be some advice you would give to them, or recommendations you would give to them on how to have a better working environment with employees who may have autism, ADHD or who are just neurodiverse in general?

**Justin McElroy** 18:20

Talk to them, ask them what they need, right? Like, everyone is different, right? And you know, trust that, like, trust that you can have an open and honest dialogue and

conversation and relationship with them. And it's not about viewing it in a way of a burden, or making sacrifices, or, "Oh, God, we have to set up this complicated structure in order to make things work." "What are areas that you're finding that are working for you, which ones aren't?" Or, "Hey, I'm noticing doing these sorts of things seems to be a bit more difficult for you. Is that true? Okay, well, what will what if you did more of this instead?" Right? A fair number of autistic people find that, you know, once you have a structure that works for you and a routine, it's great. It's just finding that structure and finding that routine and working collaboratively to do it. And that can be tough for employers, right? You're put in your box, and that's your box, and, if you want to move out of that box, that's it's got to be a completely new box. You can't, you can't just sort of like mold it around to be, like a hexagon or a new shape now.

**Jasper Chu** 19:41

Yeah, exactly.

**Justin McElroy** 19:42

That's like, that's what a lot of autistic people need. That's what I needed in my jobs. Yeah, routine. It's routine, but routine—

**Jasper Chu** 19:52

Or structure.

**Justin McElroy** 19:53

Or structure, but that I am helping to set up, and that works for my needs. Whereas bosses want are good with the structure and routine, but they want it 100% on their terms,

**Jasper Chu** 20:07

Which is not always possible. You have to meet in the middle with your employees.

**Justin McElroy** 20:12

And you know, it's the difficult thing to, you know, to to have that conversation with employers, for sometimes, and for them to understand it, right? I had bosses who understand this in the past, and I've had bosses who haven't where it's like, I am not being difficult for the sake of being difficult because like, I want to be like, because I want to be mean to you, or whatever else you think I am. You think I am being difficult, when in actuality, these one or two things that I am doing are, like, deeply stressful and really difficult for me to do because of these things that are symptoms. And if we can find a way where I don't have to do those or we do it in this way instead, I think that would go a long

way, because this is how my brain works. And that's, you know, when you're one week into a job, that's a pretty intimidating conversation to have.

**Jasper Chu 21:11**

Oh, it is. It can be, yeah. For me, I would probably be very intimidated with my employer not to share anything and I just go, "Okay, I agree to the conditions. I'll do it to the best of my ability."

**Justin McElroy 21:23**

Right? And that's masking. And, you know, we do it all the time, but there's some things that masking is a lot more harmful for.

**Jasper Chu 21:35**

It is, it can be very harmful, actually very detrimental, at least from my experience.

**Justin McElroy 21:39**

Yeah, but there's a lot of pressure, because it's like, well, I, I do want this job, right? So, okay, I'll jump through the hoops, where as I found, the older I've gotten, the more time, you know, I've lived in my autism, and fully wrap my head around it, and frankly, too, the more professionally successful I've been, the more I realized that it's like, no, you've got to be blunt, communicate—

**Jasper Chu 22:03**

Advocate for yourself.

**Justin McElroy 22:05**

Advocate for yourself. Do it in a respectful way, frame it in a way that folks understand. You know you do have to sort of over-explain sometimes, and not take it for granted, and that's tricky, and that's a challenge, but also it's so much better than the alternative.

**Jasper Chu 22:20**

Of course, of course. Justin McElroy, Municipal Affairs reporter for CBC, I want to thank you so much for your time. It's been a pleasure having you here on Re-Imagine Radio.

**Justin McElroy 22:29**

Thanks so much for having me, Jasper.