Deborah Gundle is a philanthropist, disability-inclusion advocate, and member of the Ashoka Support Network (ASN), dedicated to improving the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. As a Trustee and Programmes Manager at the Seneca Trust and Founder of Jweb, she develops and funds initiatives that support families, caregivers, and social entrepreneurs in scaling impactful solutions. Driven by lived experience as a parent, she has helped catalyze a shift toward consciously integrating disability as a core lens of social innovation—moving it from an overlooked issue to a strategic priority. Her efforts have contributed to new conversations, staff training, and a more intentional approach to representation within the Ashoka network. In this conversation, led by ASN Global Communication Manager Yuliya Koroleva, Deborah shares her vision for mainstreaming accessibility and equality, with a focus on disability inclusion in education, crisis response, and employment.

We can start from the very beginning—your story with Ashoka. How did it all begin for you?

I was an entrepreneur myself, running a digital network for professionals and families of people with intellectual disabilities. This was more than 13 years ago, when online networks were still new. I created a website that offered checklists; solutions shared by parents; for everyday challenges, like brushing a child's teeth or managing sleep routines. The idea came from baby books, which provide checklists for parents, but nothing existed for families with disabled children. The network grew into a valuable resource, with practical advice for everything from dental care to puberty. That's how I first heard of Ashoka. Fast forward to recent years: I returned to Ashoka because I've continued working in the disability field. My child, now 31, has disabilities, and I've always been active in this space. My husband and I set up a charitable foundation - the Seneca Trust - to support initiatives that promote inclusion and accessibility, with a primary focus on intellectual disabilities. Our mantra is "gaps between the gaps"—we fund projects that rarely receive resources or attention. Initially, I approached Ashoka hoping to find social entrepreneurs working in intellectual disabilities. But I realized Ashoka didn't have a dedicated stream for disability—either entrepreneurs with disabilities themselves or those working in the field. So, together with Ashoka, we launched research to systemize disability within the organization. That work is now underway: Ashoka is mapping social entrepreneurs with disabilities and those working in disability inclusion. From now on, a percentage of Ashoka Fellows selected will always represent this field.

And what outcomes stood out to you? Any surprising or significant results?

It's not really about the outcomes. The exercise is about something more important: everywhere I go, intellectual disabilities are overlooked. Philanthropy and organizations tend to focus on physical disabilities, with far fewer initiatives addressing intellectual disabilities, and even fewer for complex needs. My work is about mainstreaming intellectual disability inclusion across all sectors. Ashoka is helping me do this with social entrepreneurs, but I'm also working in other fields, like refugee systems. The goal is to ensure that people with intellectual disabilities have equal access to services and opportunities. It's about embedding accessibility into the mainstream, not just producing findings.

What do you see as the biggest barriers to making intellectual disability inclusion truly mainstream?

In the field of intellectual disabilities, people struggle to advocate for themselves. Even if they do get support, the person supporting them might not be able to get them into the right rooms, to the right tables where policy is made, where influence and change actually happen.

You've mentioned several times that the issue tends to be overlooked. Why do you think that is?

Let me start with the core reason. People with intellectual disabilities cannot advocate for themselves — by definition of their disability. There is no other disability where the person is unable to self-advocate. Blind people, people with physical disabilities — they can speak for themselves. People with intellectual disabilities need support to do that. And caring for someone with intellectual disabilities is significantly more expensive and more exhausting than almost any other situation. Families and caregivers are often financially stretched and depleted of energy. I'm speaking as a parent of someone with severe learning disabilities. My son lives in supported accommodation. If he lived with me, I simply wouldn't be able to cope physically or emotionally. He needs a team. I'm one of the lucky ones — many families don't have that support. So, the issue gets overlooked because everyone connected to it is under-resourced, overwhelmed, and exhausted. That's a major factor.

Moving from the "why" to the "how" — what would need to change from a systems view?

Let me give you an example. I once met with one of the major banks and spoke to four heads of programmes in their philanthropy department. I asked: "Do you have a dedicated focus area for disability?" Their answer, to my shock, was: "Anyone who is disabled can access whatever services we support." That response is very typical — globally. People assume disability doesn't require a distinct strategy or stream. They don't understand that disability — intellectual or physical — requires different thinking, different access, and specific inclusion. Here's a stark example. Across the world we have wars, floods, fires — and wonderful emergency organisations responding. But if you have a disability, will those emergency responders be able to help you? Usually, the answer is no. They often don't know where disabled people are, how to reach them, or how to support them. In most crises, the highest death rates are among disabled people. That alone shows why disability must be treated as a dedicated stream, not an afterthought.

Turning to Ashoka ASN — what is working well, and what could improve?

The work we're doing with Lorena García Durán; a Global Ashoka staff member, has been crucial. Historically, Ashoka hadn't mainstreamed disability. Yes, there were Fellows with disabilities and Fellows working in the field, but that happened by chance, not by design. Now there is conscious effort. Around 22% of any population has some form of disability — not even counting temporary disabilities. The Ashoka network did not reflect that. After our work together, the organisation is aiming to correct that imbalance and become more aware and more supportive. Disability has been under the radar — and Ashoka is now addressing it.

You've been with Ashoka for a long time. How do you see its evolution on this topic?

The change has been significant. Ashoka is beginning to mainstream disability — training staff, raising awareness, adapting practices to improve accessibility. It's a major and much-needed shift. I've seen firsthand how supportive Ashoka can be.

Many people encouraged you to become an Ashoka Fellow yourself. Why didn't you?

Being part of the ASN connects me to social entrepreneurs and supporters — my people, my community. That matters deeply. It also allows me to help identify and support social entrepreneurs through the network. I've also run my own social entrepreneurial projects — for example, creating the first purpose-built accessible and inclusive public playground. That alone could qualify me to apply as a Fellow. But I'm very busy with multiple projects, and becoming a Fellow wouldn't necessarily support what I'm doing right now. I also have access to resources through my own network. So, my contribution is more valuable as an ASN member than as a Fellow.

What message would you give ASN members, and how can they support you?

I'd ask them to look at whatever they are supporting and ask: is this accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities? Truly inclusive? People may be able to influence areas where disability is currently invisible — like crisis response, for example. Once someone opens your eyes to disability, you start seeing the gaps everywhere. When I built the inclusive playground, people suddenly realised how many playgrounds exclude children in wheelchairs. You don't see it unless it touches your life. My hope is that ASN members begin to notice — and act. And personally, I dream of finding other philanthropists who see disability as a critical focus and who would join forces to continue this work together. Within the ASN network, I would love to see a group of supporters who are focused on the same theme — disability and inclusion. That would be powerful. And from Ashoka's side, I'm now entering the phase where you can help connect me to social entrepreneurs whom I can support. That's precisely why I'm part of this community.

How do you apply the idea of systems change within your own organisation?

When we fund or seed-fund an initiative, one of the key things I insist on is that people with lived experience are meaningfully involved in the organisation — including on the board. That's essential for real systems change.

Is there something you're particularly proud of when you look at your organisation's success?

One thing I'm proud of is our work on crisis response. There is now growing awareness that people with disabilities in crisis situations need to be actively considered, identified, and supported. Work is being done to make sure they are not left behind in emergencies. That shift in thinking and practice is very important.

Shifting from the public to the private sector: what is usually missing in D&I programs?

When you look closely at many “diversity and inclusion” programmes, people with intellectual disabilities are often absent. If disability is mentioned, it is usually framed as high-functioning autism or neurodivergence. That’s important, but it’s not the same as including people with more significant intellectual disabilities. I believe that in almost every company, you can find roles where someone with an intellectual disability could make a real contribution.

Do you have specific recommendations for companies and HRs?

First, scope what the company actually does. Then look at organisations that support people with intellectual or learning disabilities and identify roles that could work within your context. Those roles can range from fully paid, full-time positions to very part-time roles for people with more severe intellectual disabilities. Even two hours a week can be life-changing. I recently went into a shop where a person with learning disabilities was helping. There was nothing to do that day, so the staff member said, “You can go home, there’s nothing to do.” From their perspective, that sounded kind and reasonable. But for that person, coming into the shop might be the highlight of their week. Being sent home means losing social contact, structure and a sense of purpose. I suggested instead that they ask them to restock or reorganise the shelves — anything that makes them feel needed. People with intellectual disabilities rarely have jobs and are often extremely isolated. Having a place to go, people to see, and a role to play is enormously important. I would say to any HR: think seriously about whom you can include and how — from substantial jobs to small, regular roles that still carry real value.

Who are you today, shaped by lived experience?

I think I am more confident and more fulfilled. Through our philanthropy and this work, I’ve met the most extraordinary people. Those relationships and experiences have enriched my life and made me more fulfilled and more confident. I’d say I’m a facilitator and a catalyst of social entrepreneurs. By helping them access resources and, very importantly, by making connections. A lot of my role is connecting people — to ideas, to partners, to funding — and helping them scale what they’re doing.