

## Interview with Mike Hess – Founder and Executive Director of the Blind Institute of Technology

**Krzysztof Czechowski:** Mike you are the Founder and Executive Director of the Blind Institute of Technology. The Blind Institute of Technology is a team of employees and volunteers who are passionate about changing the attitudes of blind professionals and educating companies in the field of employment for the visually impaired. Tell me, what was your road to such great success?

**Mike Hess:** After a nearly 20 year career solving technology problems in private industry, I began to question the logic, business value, and social impact that any of my work was having. It was obvious to me that I was always the token blind person and truly one of the only people with an obvious physical disability at my workplaces. I started to question what I was doing for these organizations and possibly if I could start down a path that could make more of a social impact.

**KC:** In an interview with ILO, you said that people with disabilities represent a huge untapped potential. You yourself are an example that despite your disability, you can achieve a lot in life. Tell me, which support instruments for entrepreneurs, in your opinion, are the most successful?

**MH:** In my career I had the immediate network of business professionals. Obviously this is not available to everyone however I do believe that it is possible to find business professionals to start a dialogue with through nonprofits and NGO's. I also believe that the Internet is a phenomenal place to start when curious of how to start a business plan, understanding financial reports, or beginning a marketing campaign. I have learned so much of running a business from free and readily available resources online. My background is not full of academic accolades, however I am stubborn and curious and I believe it allows me to find the resources.

**KC:** In your opinion, is the system of support and professional activation of disabled people in the United States effective?

**MH:** I believe based on the statistics of getting blind/visually impaired or the broader people with disabilities community employed, speaks for itself. I definitely believe that the professionals that work for federal and state agencies to support people with disabilities work hard, however this stigmas and perceptions around people with disabilities needs to pervasively be changed in private industry.

**KC:** Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, what measures should be taken to fully comply with the provisions of article 27 on work and employment?

**MH:** Accessibility is the cornerstone of creating better products and services for all of humanity. It is quantifiable that organizations who build accessible products both physical and virtual have overall better user experience for all patrons. When organizations adopt accessibility internally they will be able to tap into a creative set of problem solvers that will innately help their external products and services be more accessible.

**KC:** **What were your plans and dreams that in 2013 you made the decision to leave the corporation and found the Blind Institute of Technology? After all, you have been very successful managing multi-million projects, why such a decision?**

**MH:** Social impact is a true value of mine. I became tiresome of solving problems for executives that would typically only be around for 18 months. I thought I could bring a new lens to the landscape of disability and employment. One that looks at disability as a positive asset from which people are determined, creative, and loyal. With this new lens I am able to be a vehicle of change. The change I am able to make is helping 10,000 professionals with disabilities in the U.S. and 100,000 across the world find gainful employment opportunities.

**KC:** **In your opinion, is the insufficient willingness of employers to employ people with disabilities, or professional inactivity and fear of the challenge on the part of the disabled, to be a bigger problem?**

**MH:** As I stated before, stigma and perception are real. Some business leaders think of people with disabilities as a „them” statement in my experience, when in fact statistically speaking everyone has a connection within their immediate or extended network that is part of the disabled community. People with disabilities is an „us” statement. We are a part of the community and we are part of the consumer base.

**KC:** **To what extent do you think modern assistive technologies are the key to supporting education and employment of people with disabilities?**

**MH:** I believe modern assistive technologies are everything to workforce development.

**KC:** **2020 has turned out to be an extremely tough year for the entire world due to the coronavirus pandemic. Labor markets on all continents are changing their face due to many economic problems. What is the situation in the United States?**

**MH:** First of all I need to be clear on this, I run a small nonprofit out of Denver, Colorado and have never been approached by a president. In my opinion though, I believe the pandemic has created the first ever global experiment on teleworking. This has allowed business leaders globally to realize that many positions are able to be productive virtually. This is positive for individuals with disabilities because sometimes getting to an office is challenging or impossible.

What support instruments for people with disabilities has the government proposed to effectively combat the effects of the pandemic?

**KC: Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the world in a short time was forced to start using remote work and the Internet in a significant way. Do you think this situation could have an impact on the labor market of people with disabilities?**

**MH:** As I stated in the prior question, this is good for business leaders to see.

**KC: None of us know how much reality will change once the pandemic has passed. We all hope to return to normal, i.e. the life we lived in 2019. Do you think the effects of the coronavirus will be so severe for many people with disabilities that it will not be possible to restore normality?**

**MH:** „Normal” is subjective. When you think of the unemployment epidemic the people with disabilities community is still faced with, I am not hopeful for 2019 normal. I am hopeful for a future „normal” that embraces the lessons we have learned in 2020 to allow people with disabilities to have an opportunity for economic sustainability through remote/teleworking opportunities.

What should we do today to prevent this?

**KC: In closing, please tell our readers what is your way to success? What would you advise all those who have dreams, and the fact that they are struggling with disability causes them to not believe in their own abilities.**

**MH:** I believe I am a badass, engineer, father, and contributor of social impact because of my blindness! I believe that the challenges, obstacles, and frustrations I have encountered have shaped me to be a true asset to humanity. My hope is that people with disabilities embrace their inner badass as THEY HAVE much to offer the world.

**KC: Thank you very much for this interview for taking your precious time.**

**MH:** Your welcome and thank you.



Mike Hess | Founder & Executive Director of the Blind Institute of Technology (BIT)

After 20 years as a tech veteran managing 7-figure projects for Fortune 500 companies, one thing troubled Mike: he was always the token blind guy. Knowing that the invaluable skills he developed because of his blindness were the keys to his success, he couldn't understand why unemployment amongst the BVI community was so high. He embarked on a journey to change corporate America's stigmas and misperceptions of

BVI professionals, developing Blind Institute of Technology. Using the same

skills that made him a success in IT, Mike has built partnerships and placed BVI professionals in Fortune 500 companies nationwide.

Mike has been featured in the Denver Post and the Denver Business Journal and has been honored with the 2017 Martin Luther King, Jr. Business Award and the 2019 GlobalMindED Inclusive Leader Award. BIT's focus on accessible technology garnered invitations to present at Google Cloud Next 2019 and Salesforce's Dreamforce 2019 conference. Mike is a co-host for Choose Inclusion, a podcast addressing the benefits of diversity and inclusion. In 2019, Mike's vision of full access for BVI led him to develop EdgGuide, a navigation system that allows independent navigation in previously inaccessible public spaces.