

## Thoughts from a chair

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PARTNER | US

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In December of last year, Amber Melville-Brown took on the challenge of spending 48 hours in a wheelchair to raise money and awareness for Back Up, Withers nominated Charity of the Year. Amber commuted to and from work, attended meetings and social events and navigated London from her 'newly diminutive, chair-bound height of 4'. Pre-Socratic philosophers believed that the earth was flat; the pre-wheelchair-challenge Melville-Brown believed that the London pavements were equally flat – not so. In December 2014, I spent 48 hours in a wheelchair – encompassing my commute to and from work, my normal working day, meetings, lunches and evening social events. The purpose was to raise awareness of and funding for, the Withers UK Charity of the Year, the [Back Up Trust](#), which helps people to rebuild their confidence and independence after a spinal cord injury. On concluding the challenge my shoulders ached, my hands were sore, my legs were numb, but my eyes were opened. So what did I learn during those gruelling 48 hours? What all able bodied people should learn about the world in which wheelchair users live. At 5'2" I am used to having people look down on me – only from a height perspective, I should say. But at my newly diminutive, chair-bound height of less than 4', the world looks like a very different place. From that height – or lack of – one might in fact, be in a less amusing version (quite a hard feat...) of the film, *Honey I shrunk the Kids*. Buses, lorries, taxis, people, all tower above the wheelchair user in a rather intimidating manner; everyday objects are out of reach; doors swing the wrong way or are just too heavy. A stand-up buffet lunch with tall, occasional tables was a difficult occasion for the wheelchair-using-lawyer, whose nose just about grazed the plates of other diners in a less than attractive manner. My first evening social event was a Withers soiree. While I might otherwise have been rubbing shoulders with lawyers, intermediaries and clients from the real estate and construction fields, dispensing the occasion piece of subtly-placed media and reputation advice, that night it was more like navel gazing. It is a rather frightening experience to wheel oneself into a sea of suited legs with heads way out of reach of recognition. The legs do part eventually; if not exactly like the parting of the Red Sea, at least a trickle enough to allow a set of wheels to squeeze through, when the leg-owners spot the wheels approaching. But when spotted, it is easy to get yourself stuck in one spot; that's not good for mingling, and try mingling in a wheelchair with a glass of wine in one hand and only one for the wheels, without going round and round in circles. What is the etiquette of bending down for the able-bodied, to speak to those using a chair? I don't know, and indeed I have always worried that it was somewhat patronising to drop to a squat. But when my head was at minus 4' and that of my speaking companion was at 6' plus, the crick in my neck and the inability to grasp what was being said had me accepting with open arms the man who fell to his knees to carry on our conversation. Asking a regular wheelchair user at a bus stop what she thought post my own challenge, she confirmed 'it doesn't matter'. I suspect she's right. The real issue is surely this: you can be rude and patronising on your hind legs or on your haunches; it is the level of your social awareness, not the level of your head, that shows your courtesy or otherwise, to a wheelchair user. People, generally, were nice to me; as the notice on the back of my chair signalling that I was not a genuine wheelchair user but doing this the Back Up charity was deliberately discreet, I felt as though their reactions were genuine. Coffee shop doors were opened for me and my cappuccino was brought to my table; pedestrians – generally – got out of my way, save a hoard of tourists at St Pauls that needed a raised voice even to notice me at their feet; taxi drivers were polite and accommodating; gentlemen variously offered to push me up slopes; ladies smiled at me; and young men assisted me out of a cab (was it my fish-nets and patent leather knee-high boots that helped, or was it just that they wanted my cab...?) Was my city equally as nice to me as its citizens? Hmn. Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner that I love London Town. But do I love it in a wheelchair? Not so much. The camber in the pavements caused issues for Amber. Wheeling yourself in a straight line when the pavement pitches towards the road to allow drainage, causes you constantly to twist your body in a most unpleasing, back-muscle-wrenching manner. Alleyways end in stairs without warning. Ramps up one side of the road are not necessarily mirrored by ramps on the other. Potholes may be skipped over in a pair of heels but not using a pair of wheels. And who knew our beloved capital had so many mountains? Last year, as part of Withers' CSR activities, colleagues and I did the Three Peak Challenge, attempting to reach three peaks across Great Britain in 24 hours. But now I see our great city chock-full of mountainous monstrosities – previously thought of as gentle slopes – that had me heaving myself up them like David Weir in an heroic, Olympian effort. Ah, but the best part of the challenge by far, was whizzing down the North side of the 'bouncy bridge' at St Pauls on my morning commute from Tower Bridge to Old Bailey, as fast as Lewis Hamilton on a good grand prix (or so it felt). Although Back Up tutored me to conserve as much energy as possible, I suspect real, sensible wheelchair users would have relished this brief, free-wheeling, slightly out of control respite, somewhat less than the giggling I. Withers had aimed to generate £1,500 in sponsorship from this challenge. We smashed it; raising £3,600 over my brief but gruelling time. Was it worth it? Every painful moment of those 48 hours; and every painful moment since, as the pain on the pain on my painful muscles, is only now starting to subside. £3,600 allows Back Up to train 90 new wheelchair users. Every eight hours someone in the UK sustains a spinal cord injury through accident or illness which leaves them permanently paralysed. And with an estimated 50,000 people living with spinal cord injury, Back Up needs as much back up as possible. The Back-UP Trust was founded in 1986; it was voted by the UK Withers staff as our charity of the year for 2014 / 2015. It provides mentoring, wheelchair skills training, activity courses and support to those with spinal cord injuries, helping them back to work or school and to realise their full potential, while also and importantly, challenging perceptions of disability. By partnering with Back Up, Withers has confirmed its commitment to helping the charity's laudable endeavours and by spending just a couple of days – although it seemed so much longer! – in a wheelchair, I hope that I have helped us to contribute in some small way. When I wince at the pain in my hands as I pick up the phone, or moan with the ache in my shoulders as I try to type, I feel privileged; privileged that my aches and pains will pass and they are not an every day reminder of the pain of being in a wheelchair; privileged at having had the opportunity to get even a glimpse of knowing what wheelchair life is like; and privileged to know the people at Back Up who are working hard to make the lives of those who do, just that little bit better. But enough about me. How exciting would it be if others would get behind those in a wheelchair, and push themselves to help in a similar way? Being doused with a bucket of cold water in the now worldwide phenomenon of the Ice Bucket Challenge may not be particularly pleasant, but it isn't

really that difficult and it raised huge sums of money for a worthy charitable cause. Less pleasant still than a quick, cold shower, is 48 hours in a wheelchair, or even 4.8 hours for that matter. Can I persuade another firm or company to take up the wheelchair challenge? Who will be the first to come forward for Back Up...?

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