

# Accessibility Certification Model – Discussion Summary

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## Participants

Name	Organization
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Louise Martel	Personne en situation de handicap
Josée Théorêt	Fromagerie St-Albert
Karl Parent	Parent Valu Mart, Alfred
Linda C. Seguin	Armoire Seguin, Alfred
Caroline Prévost	Clinique de sante familiale de Plantagenet
Diane Leduc-Boulérice	Solutions auditives Annick, Casselman
Diane Jean	Centre culturel Louis Hémon, Chapleau
Melissa Lamontagne	Sérénité Cleaning Solutions, Sudbury
Nicole Lortie	Solution Jardin, Bourget
Mathieu Lalonde	Mathieu Media Production, Casselman
Ginette Goulet	Consultants G. Goulet, Casselman
Anne Comtois-Lalonde	Prescott-Russell
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## Discussion Themes

15 participants discussed the development of an accessibility certification model. The participants ranged from small business owners to organizations representing persons with disabilities. The discussion touched on a broad range of issues, grouped by theme below:

### Distinguishing between certification and the law

**Participants agreed that a certification model would be distinct and independent from the law. It could cover areas of business and society where the law is too general. That said, participants emphasized that all aspects of the model, from design to development to marketing, should clearly convey that certification does not replace the law in any way.**

- The goal of certification should be a universal set of standards across the various sectors of society; it should complement and partner with rather than distract from or redouble existing efforts
  - o Businesses have varying obligations under the law, depending on the size of the organization, the number of employees, etc. An approach based on universal access could complement the law in the social and economic spheres
- While compliance may serve as a base (e.g., standards for automatic doors, ramps, etc.), many business owners would benefit from an understanding of which accommodations their specific community needs
  - o A certification model or marketing campaign does not impede businesses from following the law; rather, it might facilitate daily life for persons with disabilities

- While certification would be rigorous and would involve mechanisms to ensure its integrity, clear criteria, and a well-respected and credible certifying body, certification could distinguish itself from the law in several ways:
  - o Chambers of commerce or existing advocacy organizations could coordinate the program, rather than government
  - o The process could avoid the wording and symbol for “accessibility” (in favour of, e.g., universal access) in order to avoid confusing certification with compliance
  - o The standard of evaluation should be adaptable and consumer-centric
- A voluntary certification program (e.g., ISO or environmental qualifications) can create a culture where displayed certification gives the consumer confidence that an organization is serious about accessibility and proud of their accomplishments

## The Economic Argument

**It is essential to clearly communicate the economic argument and other incentives for business so that organizations see certification as a valuable pursuit. Organizations may hesitate for several reasons: maybe they are too busy, or do not see how universal access applies to their business. By concentrating on their specific consumer, each business can evaluate the risks, costs, and benefits of certification particular to them.**

- Participants emphasized that large and small organizations alike would need motivation to go after certification
  - o Small and medium sized enterprises are often restricted by both direct costs (i.e., buying equipment, retrofitting space) and indirect costs (i.e., change management, planning, and employee training time)
  - o On the other hand, participants noted that the certification model could have more traction with small organizations where owners have more direct control over operations
  - o Participants suggested communicating what businesses could gain from increasing their accessibility as well as what they could lose (e.g., businesses who claim not to have any customers with disabilities are losing a customer base)
- Implementing accessibility would be seen as an investment rather than an expense
  - o The investment might be more affordable if businesses prioritize accessibility initiatives that will serve the largest portion of their customer base
  - o In smaller communities, this might mean determining how many people in the community need accommodation and targeting changes specifically to their needs
- Businesses have a great opportunity to attract a broader customer base by embracing universal access across all operations (e.g., offering staff training can be as important as structural adjustments)
  - o The aging population provides a great opportunity for businesses that are able to serve the demographic
  - o Consumers might give preference to businesses that are visibly accessible
  - o Given current economic conditions, businesses cannot afford to turn away potential customers
- A publicity and marketing strategy, involving a well-defined and recognizable logo would help to get early leaders on board

- The logo should be a standalone symbol as images are more accessible and universal than text (e.g., the logo for Wi-Fi)

### A simple, evolving, and adaptable model

**The participants agreed that a simple, evolving, and adaptable model would be most feasible and most attractive to business. This would, again, be distinct from the law and could take the form of simple criteria, customer evaluations, or recognition for successes, subject to the needs and limitations of various businesses, regions, and individual sectors.**

- The business owners in the discussion noted that the breadth of resources currently available is complicated and vast in number; a toolkit or an advisory committee would help navigate the existing tools and services
  - Existing organizations and programs could be incorporated in the process and could accelerate its implementation
- Participants with lived experience of disability said they would appreciate the certainty of navigating public life without having to ask themselves if a business is accessible
- The model could be evolving, recognizing businesses' current state with the understanding that they will improve over time
  - E.g., an establishment may not have ramps, but has well-trained staff willing and able to help persons with disabilities; the program should encourage businesses to commit to a starting point and to improve from there)
- Each business has different obligations and needs to fill based on their customer base; a certification model could be structured around the client perspective, where certification would depend on asking the client about their priorities: what is important? A well-trained staff? The built environment?
- Accessibility should be evaluated on an ongoing basis, with businesses and organizations seeking certification renewal after a certain period

### Concentrate on the customer

**Participants proposed that by concentrating on the customer, the model could maximize adaptability for minimal cost. If businesses seek to serve their existing, potential, or targeted customer, accommodating for accessibility becomes a good investment and a link to the community, specific to each enterprise and its clientele.**

- Accessibility means many things beyond build environment; it is an attitude that values each customer's experience
- The level of customer service should be uniform across sectors, but with specificities
  - A system of public endorsement, based on levels of customer satisfaction – e.g., Trip Advisor – would establish universal standards while also allowing adaptability between regions and sectors
- A system, potentially online, that would allow clients to indicate to businesses if they require specific accommodation would augment the level of accessibility that businesses provide according to the law
- On the other hand, some participants with disabilities remarked that they can feel vulnerable when asking for accommodation; a visible symbol of "accessibility" would

allow persons with disabilities to approach establishments with certainty and without having to ask for help

- Individuals with intellectual disabilities or “invisible” disabilities would have greater certainty that an employee or business knows how to support them
- Staff that are well-trained and aware of the principles of universal access (and clearly identified as such) are often as useful as an accessible physical location (e.g., some communities distribute the names, support person contact information, and medications for people with dementia among local businesses)

## Gathering resources

**As mentioned above, small and medium enterprises are often overwhelmed by the multitude of accessibility resources available. Gathering these resources in one place would help businesses to implement an accessibility model. Resources could be deployed through workshops, online documents, or partnership and mentorship arrangements, whether business to business or between organizations and persons with disabilities. This would support a simple model that is able to adapt to different regions, client groups, and sectors.**

- A phone number or website for business owners, managed by a politically neutral third party organization, could serve as a helpline to support businesses according to their capabilities
- As other participants have discussed, resources are most effective when tailored to the business size and context (e.g., a local grocery store versus a franchise restaurant)
- We have the advantage of online resources (e.g., training webinars, email, teleconference) and their ability to reach individuals across the province

## Education as a component of certification

**Education should support certification. Some participants remarked that business owners want to be accessible but do not know how or where to start. More awareness of the barriers to accessibility could help drive a broader culture change. The participants noted that organizations that train their employees to be aware of accessibility challenges are already further ahead than those that comply with the law but cannot offer service excellence to customers of all abilities.**

- If we develop a solution for the province, would the model link different organizations across regions? Could this be a regional solution under a provincial brand?
  - Successful programs often have regional roots; the goal of the model could be the same across regions, but with a spectrum of options depending on the size of the business or the region
  - The certifying body could run a marketing campaign at the provincial level geared towards providing information, with certain services located regionally as required
  - The program could have an administrative centre with regional representatives and mentors
  - The model’s method of evaluation should incorporate a level of flexibility and personal judgment while also ensuring integrity in its criteria
- The participants had a robust discussion around the role of language in the design and development of the certification model

- The model, as well as all associated resources, should be developed in both official languages and not simply translated so that the French and English processes reflect the different experiences of each community (francophone and anglophone)
- Most participants did not think that language should be a criteria for accessibility; bilingual service should rather be considered a desired characteristic of the group that administers the certification model

## Risks and considerations

**The participants noted several risks and points to consider. Some participants thought the discussion was still too vague and lacking in direction. Phases two and three will drive towards more concrete outcomes. Many participants suggested that businesses may not be interested in the model due to the costs associated with certification, employee training, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. Participants agreed that the model would have to incorporate a robust system for evaluation, in order to determine whether businesses maintained their accessibility. To this point, participants thought that the model would have to be managed by an independent and well-respected organization and remain independent from the law.**

- In order to be impactful, certification must include clear, well-defined, and respected criteria so that all businesses are held to the same standard
  - If the model is too complicated, businesses will default to the legal standards
- The model will need to be self-sustaining; in the participants' opinion, businesses will not be interested if they are paying for certification out of pocket
- It will be critical to understand what makes certification attractive to business
  - Small and medium sized enterprises may find certification overwhelming if it does not start from a manageable place or if it adds costs and work without return
  - The intangible costs to business (e.g., the lost hours from sending an employee to training) are often ignored or underestimated
  - Branding and marketing is critical; it will be important to establish a pride in being certified for businesses that sign on (e.g., hospitals do not have to be certified, but they do so as a matter of diligence)
- The model must be explicitly distinct from the law: certification does not mean that a business is in compliance with the five AODA standards; it is an add-on, not a replacement for compliance
- The model should involve a method of evaluation, as well as a method of revoking certification if the business is no longer accessible.

Thank you to all of our participants. We invite you to continue with the process. We are currently kicking off our next phase. Over the course of Phase 2, we will take account of the necessary components of an accessibility certification model (the “what” and the “how”). Participate in person as a Phase 2 working group member or online at [certifiedforaccess.ca](https://certifiedforaccess.ca).