

Accessibility Certification Roundtable Session 3 – Brief Summary

December 10, 2015

On December 10th, over 65 individuals representing a broad range of business, accessibility, and community interests gathered to discuss the opportunities and challenges in developing a voluntary accessibility certification model. Participants included those with lived experience of auditory, visual and mobility disabilities, and spanned across industries including transportation, tourism, technology, and hospitality. Many had worked on previous initiatives to develop accessibility training, programs, and education in the public, non-profit, and private sectors, contributing a diversity of experience and perspectives.

Designing an evolving model

Participants agreed that the model would need to be evolving and agile, able to adapt to individual circumstances but broad enough to apply across a wide range of business types and sectors. Participants were divided on whether a certification model should start with a focus on one sector or accessibility challenge, or whether it should be broad-based. Participants emphasized that a broad approach would not mean one-size-fits-all. Rather, the model should account for the specific needs of different sectors and customer types. One suggested approach was to emphasize customer endorsements or threshold of support, while another was to structure the model around a general methodology or process rather than a specific sector or focus area.

Defining approaches to accessibility

Several participants were critical of the term “certification,” raising concerns that it implies enforcement of the AODA. There was also a general lack of clarity around how certification fit with other AODA initiatives. Participants thought that certification implied a certain rigour or set of criteria, which might ultimately lead to a “checklist” approach that might exclude certain considerations, standards, or communities from the discussion. Some participants were also concerned as to whether the process had a firm definition of accessibility, whether certification would be the only model considered (versus, for instance, recognition), and who would be implementing such a model. Some participants also expressed the concern that certification might be a distraction from AODA enforcement and compliance.

Echoing previous sessions, most participants agreed that incentives for business could complement enforcement of AODA requirements in achieving culture change surrounding accessibility. They suggested a two pronged approach: education and simple, actionable steps. An awareness campaign could serve as a platform for information-sharing on the benefits of universal access, best practice examples of accessible service delivery (e.g., the City of Vancouver), and the return on investment from accessible operations.

Participants suggested using language familiar to businesses, showing low cost, easy solutions, and working back from the needs of the customer. Smaller organizations face capacity constraints, while larger organizations are already overburdened with regulation. Solutions should look at the day to day reality of businesses and provide incentives that outweigh the costs of implementation. These incentives might be financial or recognition-based or they might

illustrate the consequences of not being accessible. As one participant stated, growing demographics of seniors and persons with disabilities make accessibility harder and harder to ignore. Change is happening, and businesses must adapt.

Incentivizing culture change and inclusiveness

Participants distinguished between the business case and the economic argument for accessibility. The business case will differ for each enterprise and may not always justify accessibility in the short term. The economic argument justifies accessibility as a long term good in terms of equity and for business: it shifts the focus to the experience of accessibility, allowing businesses to “monetize the argument in a community-oriented way”. Businesses make a sound investment in accessibility when one considers the long term costs associated with a society that excludes a large portion of its population.

Inclusion and community were dominant themes throughout the day’s discussion, as participants urged inclusivity and collaboration in the design, scope, and implementation of an accessibility certification model. Certification should be developed with the input of persons with disabilities as well as business and subject matter experts from the public and non-profit sectors. The model, once developed, should account for persons with a wide range of disabilities, aging seniors, and persons with “invisible” disabilities. Universal language and symbols, as well as an emphasis on universal access and design, would ensure that those involved are “speaking the same language”. This could be in the literal sense, to brand and market accessibility as a movement, or in the figurative sense of community-building.

Several participants suggested community partnerships or mentorships as a way to promote accessibility champions and to make resources easily available to businesses. Participants suggested various bodies or individuals who could serve as community mentors. While some suggested early adopters such as banks or business leaders could act as mentors, others suggested certifying individuals with lived experience of barriers to accessibility. Another idea was to build a coalition of public and non-profit agencies or community organizations with experience in implementing accessibility. These members could apply lessons learned in their own sector to support business partnerships. A hybrid model might involve Business Improvement Area Associations or Municipal Advisory Committees working with persons with disabilities as subject matter experts. This would provide another opportunity for marketing and communication on inclusive dialogue and accessibility as an asset to the community.

Leveraging existing tools

In discussing model design, participants suggested leveraging a wealth of existing tools. These tools include business case toolkits, excellence standards, and crowdsourcing tools to identify accessible services. Existing public and non-profit programs and sites for dialogue could extend to the business context. Some participants, however, argued that there were gaps between what existing programs cover and true accessibility. While most participants agreed that there was no point in “reinventing the wheel”, most thought there needed to be an evaluation framework to determine which tools work well and how they might be leveraged for the private sector context. The central question was how to motivate change: reward behaviour, incentivize through business drivers, or enforce consequences?

Participants agreed that there is an economic argument for accessibility that might be addressed by a simple and evolutionary model. While this model must rely on a continuum of

tools, participants were divided on whether the toolbox should include “certification” as such. There are also a number of other options as tools for achieving certification, such as crowdsourcing, which can be explored. Participants emphasized the continued importance of fundamental human rights principles: a certification or similar model should be based on equity as well as business considerations. It should complement but not replace AODA enforcement.

Next Steps

A more detailed summary will follow; in the meantime, the discussion continues on certifiedforaccess.ca. Please share your thoughts, stories, and resources to help create a process that will encourage accessibility for all Ontarians.

We would like to thank everyone who has participated to date in our Phase 1 consultations, whether in person, over the phone, or online. We will keep you posted on next steps.