

Accessibility Certification Consultation: Cross-Community Session Detailed Summary

Roundtable Discussion – December 10, 2015

Meeting Objectives

60 individuals representing a broad range of business, accessibility, and community interests gathered on December 10th to discuss the opportunities and challenges in developing a voluntary accessibility certification model for business. 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, business models, and education in the public, non-profit, and private sectors, contributing a diversity of experience and perspectives.

This session was the last in person discussion for Phase 1 of the Accessibility Certification Consultation process. The intent of Phase 1 was to facilitate a dialogue between impacted stakeholders in order to:

- articulate problems
- dispel myths and misconceptions; and
- identify solutions that could be addressed through an independent, self-sustaining certification-type model.

This session built on previous sessions, with aim of building consensus around key themes and focus areas that could serve as foundations for future project phases. As such, the objectives for this Phase 1 meeting were to:

- ensure that all represented communities have a shared understanding of the goal of the process
- discuss and outline what kind of accessibility system participants want
- reach agreement on key tasks for the next stage of the process

The model resulting from this process is to be developed collaboratively by persons with disabilities, businesses and organizations. In other words, those who would be most impacted by certification will use their lived experience and knowledge to find and implement solutions.

Meeting Agenda

In plenary and breakout sessions, participants reviewed the in person and online discussion to date, identifying priorities and gaps according to three guiding questions:

1. What key barriers do organizations, seniors and persons with disabilities face with regards to accessibility?
2. What would make a certification model attractive to organizations, seniors, persons with disabilities and certifying bodies?
3. What are some key risks and success factors in developing an accessibility certification model in Ontario?

This discussion was followed by a presentation of four existing certification models that could serve as examples for the type of model that might emerge from this process. The list of examples was not exhaustive. The models were presented as a starting point for a discussion on existing tools and the risks and success factors inherent in successfully applying these tools to the business context. Examples varied along several parameters: institutional vs. non-institutional, centrally managed vs. crowd-sourced, tiered vs. pass/fail, etc. Participants considered potential design characteristics, based on in person and online discussions and jurisdictional research:

Based on What We Have Heard	Based on Existing Successful Models
Simple	Develop a clear understanding of the underlying issue(s) and objective(s) of the model
Evolving	Pilot the model and design monitoring and evaluation procedures to ensure long-term relevance and success
Collaborative	Engage multiple stakeholders throughout the development process
A continuum of options	Develop standards that are balanced, flexible and directly aligned with the underlying goals of the model
Voluntary	Use of logos and other incentives to promote interest and uptake in a certification model
Distinct based on different types of business	Use a trusted, third-party certifier to provide credible, independent and objective assurances that model objectives are being achieved

Following the discussion of existing models, participants discussed some of the key considerations and priorities to keep in mind when developing a certification-type model:

- What issues should an accessibility certification model address?
- What are the guiding principles and objectives of an accessibility certification model?
- How can an accessibility certification model be designed to further these principles and objectives?
- Who should develop and deliver an accessibility certification model?
- What will make the model attractive for different users and different types of business?
- How and who should evaluate an accessibility certification model?

This report captures the content and spirit of discussion, grouped according to emerging key themes.

Conclusions

At the end of the day, 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, with technological innovation as a core driver, participants were divided on whether the toolbox should include “certification” as such as there was some discussion as to what this term actually means. (For more on this discussion see page 4). As part of this discussion, 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. Some worried that the timelines were too short to allow for a thoughtful co-design process, while others felt the first step of getting people in the same room was a useful starting point. Participants agreed that certification should complement but not distract from enforcing the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). Most importantly, inclusion would be the core of this initiative.

Key Themes and Focus Areas

Designing an Evolving and Agile System

Participants agreed that any 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.

Design Considerations

Participants were divided on whether a certification model should start with a focus on one sector or challenge area, 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. A model should reflect that accommodation will mean something different for each business.

Participants proposed:

- An approach of abundance rather than scarcity, focusing on the business-customer ecosystem rather than prioritizing certain groups or areas of functioning.
- Recognition for businesses that reach a certain threshold of accessibility or inclusiveness based on customer endorsement
- Crowd sourcing to allocate “points” to businesses based on whether individuals’ interactions with specific businesses “measured up”
- Strategies to capture different types of business and different business-customer relationships in one model without limiting or segmenting the model
- A general methodology or process as foundation rather than a specific sector or focus area.

Process and Implementation

Several participants expressed concern that the consultation timelines were too short to allow for meaningful dialogue and inclusive, organic co-design. They worried about the quality and rigour of a model emerging from a relatively quick process that might limit the opportunities for input and validation. Others, however, thought that short timelines were not inherently a problem

so long as the development process was ongoing, transparent, and evolutionary, with a focus on lessons learned.

Participants proposed:

- Starting with manageable, incremental steps and recognizing small successes (e.g., putting braille on company cards, gaining a reputation as an accessible built environment, demonstrating an accessibility-friendly organizational culture)
- Starting with a belief in the process or in the idea of achieving excellence in accessibility
- Defining an evolutionary path, with levels iteratively determined as the model matures
- Initial steps that could serve as a foundation in the short term for scaled growth in the long term

There was a robust discussion around how technology would fit within this process. An evolving certification model could adapt to technological innovation with more agility than legislation and standards, providing a living, moving complement to regulatory frameworks. Further, technology opens robust channels to capture individual experience and feedback, allowing end users to own and influence the model throughout its evolution.

Defining what Accessibility Certification Looks Like

Participants were 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.

Defining Certification

When thinking about potential models, several participants were skeptical of the word certification and its implications. Participants thought that certification implied a certain rigour or defined set of criteria, resembling a second set of regulations.

- A “checklist” approach risks excluding certain considerations, standards, or communities from the discussion and runs counter to the idea of an evolving, user-owned model
- There was a lack of clarity around how certification fits with other AODA initiatives
- Participants were concerned that certification would be a distraction from AODA enforcement and compliance
- New standards could serve as an unnecessary regulatory burden for business, drawing support and resources from existing or community-led initiatives

On the other hand, many participants believed that a certification model did not necessarily need to look like traditional certification (i.e., a rigid set of standards or an institutional framework), and rather could:

- Be based on the customer experience of accessibility
- Recognize small cultural changes that embed accessibility in a company’s brand

As one participant said: “There...needs to be a focus on encouraging these businesses to look for innovative ways to incorporate accessibility, whether it’s in manufacturing or customer service”. This would promote awareness while avoiding the checklist approach often favoured by traditional certification models.

Incentivizing Cultural Change

Echoing previous sessions, most participants agreed that a model incentivizing culture change for business could complement enforcement. They suggested a multi-pronged approach, incorporating education and simple, actionable steps.

Raising Awareness on the Economics of Accessibility

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. One participant stated: “Standards are not enough. There is no guideline for someone that wants to do the right thing...People aren’t necessarily attitudinal in that they don’t want to do it. It’s just that there is not enough accurate information.” Awareness would promote the idea that accessibility is a foundation of business, and that solutions benefit everyone. As one participant stated: “By doing one thing for one person, you’re not doing it for one, but literally doing it for everybody. You are making processes better and more productive and more profitable.”

Participants emphasized:

- A certification model would need to clearly communicate the economic benefit of operating accessibly, as well as the economic loss from remaining inaccessible
- Businesses needed a stronger argument than that it is “the right thing to do” in order to see the value in moving beyond compliance

Participants here 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 business: it shifts the focus to the experience of accessibility, allowing businesses to “monetize the argument in a community-oriented way”

The investment in accessibility could be minimal compared with the long term social and financial costs associated with a society that excludes a large portion of its population. To this point, some participants urged others to remember that awareness of human rights and equity should be the impetus behind any economic argument for cultural change.

Simple Solutions

In order to action raising awareness, participants suggested using language familiar to businesses, showcasing low cost, easy solutions, and working back from the needs of the customer at the centre of any venture.

Participants emphasized:

- 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

- Incentives might be financial or recognition-based or they might illustrate the consequences of non-accessibility
- Given the right tools, businesses can become accessible; a model would need to address why they do not or have not done so
- Building a brand around accessibility would help businesses incorporate the concept into their operating model
- The opportunity to appeal to existing and untapped customer bases would be a major incentive for business
- The growing demographics of seniors and persons with disabilities is making accessibility harder and harder to ignore
- Change is happening, and businesses must adapt

Promoting Inclusion and Community-Led Solutions

Inclusion and community were dominant themes throughout the day's discussion. Participants saw collaboration as fundamental in the design, scope, and implementation of an accessibility model.

Networks of Community Support

Participants agreed that the certification model should be community-led. It 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. As one participant stated: "Get business people to ask us what they need to do. Let's answer their questions and help them accomplish the goal". The model, once developed, should account for persons with a wide range of disabilities, aging seniors, and persons with "invisible" disabilities.

Participants proposed:

- Community partnerships or mentorships could promote accessibility champions and make resources easily available to businesses.
- Some suggested early adopters such as banks or business leaders as potential mentors, others suggested certifying individuals with lived experience of barriers to accessibility
- A coalition of public and non-profit agencies or community organizations with experience in implementing accessibility could apply lessons learned in their own sector to support business partnerships
- Participants suggested existing models in the academic and non-profit spheres or customer-facing public agencies as suitable pilot sites

A hybrid model might involve Business Improvement Area Associations or Municipal Advisory Committees serving as coordinating bodies and working with persons with disabilities as subject matter experts. One breakout group emphasized that a certification model could only be successful if it looked at the business ecosystem. Manufacturers and suppliers must also build their products and delivery with accessibility in mind in order for the system to work.

Common Language and Clear Definitions

Groups emphasized that establishing a common lexicon would be critical in establishing partnerships and bringing communities together. A shared understanding of core concepts such

as “inclusiveness” or “accessibility” would allow for multiple grassroots and community initiatives to establish shared objectives between themselves and with business communities.

Participants proposed:

- A common lexicon could be based in universal language and symbols, with an emphasis on universal access and design
- “Speaking the same language” would be essential to achieving broader impact
- The accessibility brand could build out of this community, serving to clearly communicate the objectives and ideas behind a certification model

Leveraging Existing Tools

Many of the participants noted that the wheel does not have to be recreated, there are many tools available. These tools could enhance businesses understanding of the requirements of accessibility and how to take tangible steps.

Linking Resources and Business

In discussing model design, participants suggested leveraging the wealth of existing tools. These tools include business case toolkits, excellence standards, and crowdsourcing to identify accessible services. Existing public and non-profit models could extend to the business context. Some participants, however, argued that there were gaps between what models and standards currently cover and true accessibility.

- The supporting infrastructure for those already working on accessibility models could be strengthened with further integration and collaboration between communities
- While most participants agreed that there was no point in “reinventing the wheel”, most also 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

Two central questions drove discussion: how to motivate change and who to motivate. Do we reward behaviour, incentivize through business drivers, or enforce consequences? Are we driving consumers or business?

- Several participants put forward the idea of individuals as a great untapped resource
- Persons with lived experience of barriers to accessibility could serve as subject matter experts
- Lived experience could also serve as a measurement tool in itself

One participant stated: “We have individuals using services daily...they are the measurement of excellence.” Many participants saw potential in technology to harness individual experience as a starting point. Clicking “like” or showing support by “gold stars” or ratings is an individual, crowd-based approach that could serve to accumulate data and support further evolution of the model to the organizational or systemic level.

Next Steps

We will be launching Phase 2 of the certification consultation process in early 2016, with two objectives: to prioritize and explore the issues identified in Phase 1 in depth and to put forward a blueprint certification model and implementation considerations. 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.