Accessibility Certification Consultation: Disability Community Detailed Summary

Roundtable Discussion – November 25, 2015

The roundtable discussion held on November 25 with members of the business community was an integral part of the accessibility certification consultation process. Participants attended from a range of sectors, including hospitality, tourism, technology, and the broader public sector. Some participants could speak to lived experience as both business owners and a persons with a disability, while others varied in their knowledge of accessibility and the level of accommodation or considerations required.

The intent of this process 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.

The end objective is for a certification model to be developed collaboratively by persons with disabilities, businesses and organizations. In other words, those who would be most impacted by certification will be responsible for finding solutions and making them work.

Guiding Questions from the Roundtable Discussion

The roundtable was an open ended facilitated discussion, with three questions to guide thoughts and comments:

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

While this report will attempt to capture the content and central themes discussed under each question, some key design considerations for any accessibility certification model emerged overall. A successful certification model would have to be simple. It would have to allow for evolution and iteration and distinguish between different types of business. Finally, a collaborative approach would leverage expertise and lived experience across sectors, allowing businesses to share and build on successes.

1. What key barriers do organizations, seniors and persons with disabilities face with regards to accessibility?

Barriers to accessibility include:

– Attitudinal barriers
– A general lack of awareness regarding accessibility issues

- Lack of transparency in the process of addressing accessibility
- Lack of enforcement or "teeth" in accessibility standards

Participants identified attitudinal barriers and a lack of awareness as the main challenges to accessibility. While companies and employers might want to create accessibility, they often do not know what that looks like. Participants agreed that any strategy would have to incorporate education and action: spreading awareness should be supported by resources on how to take action based on that awareness.

As one stakeholder stated, "You need to move from a place of understanding to where [people] might need help understanding. It's not us that have disabilities, it's the places that we work, live and play in that are disabled." Participants made a point that while certification could help spread the conversation surrounding accessibility and could reach individuals and organizations not bound by regulatory requirements, certification should always complement and enhance, rather than replace, legislation.

Raising awareness:
- Marketing campaigns could disseminate information in public locations, such as public transit, or feature vignettes highlighting barriers and how they impact various people (as when AODA was first implemented)
- Accessibility "champions" could spread the word
- Barrier-free education and employment could help to raise awareness among employers as to what steps are needed

Participants suggested that education and awareness should be delivered in a way that is "transparent, engaging, and practical". Many participants emphasized the importance of telling "human" stories instead of producing public service announcements. Tying accessibility to stories or vignettes could help initiatives gain greater traction. Awareness-raising efforts should reach beyond public life as well: barrier-free education initiatives have been gaining momentum and could serve to accelerate similar barrier-free employment campaigns.

While major informational campaigns could help spread the word – Alberta's accessibility campaign was held up as a particular example, just as Ontario promoted AODA when it was first introduced – some stakeholders were frustrated with the lack of tangible progress and were eager to explore new strategies to build awareness or take more concrete action: "We need to give people something that's easy and practical to use, like a checklist". Solutions could be simple, such as de-cluttering retail spaces or removing unneeded chairs in public venues. Some participants raised concerns, however, that a checklist or other tool would not be useful unless the person using it was aware of why accessibility is important in the first place. Businesses often implement some accessible features but not others; training to support a checklist would establish easy, practical first steps to work towards guiding principles.

Many participants referred to the "curb cut metaphor", the idea that small changes to increase accessibility are useful for everyone. One participant stated: "Both checklists and education should build toward the finish line of integration…I'm not a person with a disability; I do things differently." Universal design principles help to break down barriers between business and accessibility advocates, with the end goal of building community. Businesses should be challenged to be creative in how they can offer their services in a way that is accessible to their target market.

Key questions:
- How do you incentivize businesses to pay attention? How do you make people aware?
- How do you enforce certification?

2. What would make a certification program attractive to organizations, seniors, persons with disabilities and certifying bodies?

Some tools to implement accessibility include:

– A best-practices checklist
– Examples of accessible practice in action
– Testimonials for business people from colleagues
– Mentorships between businesses and mentorships between individuals

One stakeholder's experience with a municipally-run program underlined the need to make certification attractive for businesses and end users. Program administrators approached local businesses and assessed their spaces for accessibility. Despite the fact that the program had a checklist, resources, and low cost, simple solutions, some businesses were reluctant to engage and move forward with the information. Most were not aware of the AODA, while others did not see accessibility as a valuable investment.

Businesses need evidence on why "[moving] down this path is for [their] own good". In the short term, financial incentives might help; these could include wage subsidies for employees with a disability or an accommodation fund for smaller organizations. A certification program could also incorporate new strategies to share market research on how accessibility can improve a business's bottom line. Equally, data could show how a lack of accessibility negatively impacts a business's productivity. Using models and language familiar to business, such as a star or rating system, would support messaging that frames accessibility as an asset rather than "the right thing to do". Businesses could profit from hiring and serving persons with disabilities, senior citizens, and others with barriers to access. Participants saw the need for more education on how to leverage this opportunity.

Participants saw promoting business leaders or "champions" in accessibility as critical in furthering this goal, prompting both healthy competition for excellence among municipalities and organizations and providing opportunities for collaboration. Using marketing strategies, such as logos, branding, or scoring (as with a LEED, B Corp, or Better Business Bureau model) would frame certification as a positive rather than shaming exercise. Further bringing accessibility into the mainstream by highlighting relevant film and TV and harnessing social media would help increase awareness. Sharing success stories and individual viewpoints would make accessibility more "relatable". Labelling businesses as "accessible" or providing an emblem of Accessibility Excellence would provide consumers with valuable information and reward companies doing good work.

Making the model work:

– Community and grassroots organizations could do as much to improve accessibility as government
– Making a voluntary approach work will require a multi-pronged strategy in which businesses support each other
– Business Area Improvement Associations and Chambers of Commerce could serve as central points for information and support for smaller establishments

Participants emphasized that a multi-pronged strategy, leveraging existing efforts in marketing, funding, crowd sourcing, and networking, would be most effective at embedding accessibility in the long term. Community and grassroots efforts could have as much impact as government, particularly in terms of businesses supporting each other. Accessibility "champions" could spread the word among their networks, while business to business mentorship arrangements could ease implementation costs for smaller establishments. Business Area Improvement Associations and Chambers of Commerce could serve as a central point for information and support for smaller establishments. Businesses could become

partners in accessibility, with one entity offering services the other lacks. Success would be contingent on increasing communication between the accessibility and business communities.

3. What are some key risks and success factors in developing an accessibility certification program in Ontario?

A good certification model should:

– Be aspirational and evolving
– Provide incentives for business to move beyond compliance
– Incorporate aspects of healthy competition and collaboration
– Complement and build on the foundations of regulation and human rights principles

Participants emphasized that a certification model would have to be aspirational and evolving. The program would need clearly defined standards and objectives in order to be enforceable, though with a toolkit of resources to support uptake. A simple action plan or incremental ratings system would gradually engrain accessible values in a business's model rather than requiring wholesale change. This potential model could incorporate aspects of healthy competition and collaboration, with incentive for business to move beyond compliance. B-Corporation's triple bottom line, LEED's sustainability certification, and the Better Business Bureau were held up as examples that stakeholders could leverage in developing a model for accessibility.

Participants noted that certification should complement and build on the foundations of regulation and human rights principles. The program could be based on different levels of competence, setting existing legislation as the baseline and moving to more aspirational levels. Inclusion would have to be present at every stage of development and implementation. As well, participants noted that persons with disabilities should be present at every step of the process, representing a range of perspectives and lived experience. Accessibility is different for everyone and needs to be carefully defined to ensure that no voice is left out.

Participants agreed that certification should apply all aspects of a business's operations in order to support true culture change and minimize cost to the business. Employing persons with disabilities will increase the visibility of barriers and the benefits of accessibility. It was acknowledged that small businesses face higher costs in adopting accessible hiring practices and service operations. Small companies require employees to have a more versatile skillset and employers are often unaware of the possibilities and the responsibilities associated with filling this position. They may also be dissuaded by the extra cost of investment in training and built environment retrofit.

Participants countered that it should be an employer's duty to tailor jobs for individual capabilities. Two strategies might help employers successfully hire persons with disabilities. First, early adopters, such as big banks, could serve as "mentors" for small businesses. Second, accessibility could be incorporated into learning curricula for future business leaders who could embed accessibility considerations in their model from the beginning.

Feedback

Please comment, question, and provide input on the summary above on certifiedforaccess (dot) ca. We look forward to moving forward with your participation.

Participants

Participant	Organization
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Allan Angus	Individual Representative
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Jennifer Young	Abilities Centre
Brad Brohman	Rick Hansen Foundation
Gail Mores	March of Dimes
Maayan Ziv	Access Now
Charles Silverman	Professor at Ryerson School of Disability Studies
Vicki Mayer	Audio Tactile Network
Melanie Moore	Centre for Independent Living Toronto
Leesa Levinson	Lights Camera Access
Monica Winkler	Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work
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