Accessibility Certification Consultation: Business Community Detailed Summary

Roundtable Discussion – November 27, 2015

Our Purpose

The roundtable discussion held on November 27 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 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 becoming accessible include:

– Attitudinal barriers and lack of awareness
– Shortage of time, resources, and information to get started
– Challenges adapting a service delivery model to include accessibility
– Complexities of designing a unified model for a wide range of business types

Participants identified attitudinal barriers and lack of awareness as the key challenges persons with disability face in accessing business. Small organizations that are unsure of their requirements are not incentivized to go beyond compliance. Employers who want to embrace accessibility do not know where to start or even what "accessibility" really means. Businesses are not always aware that solutions can be simple and mundane: considering chair placement in public venues, reducing clutter in retail and hospitality spaces, considering a broad range of barriers to access.

Small and large businesses face different challenges in adapting their service delivery model to include accessibility. Small businesses often lack the time, resources, and information to get started. Perhaps for this reason, accessibility awareness tools have gained much better traction with large organizations. Unified criteria and standards provide these larger organizations with clarity on their responsibilities. Businesses are more likely to implement accessible procedures if given defined parameters and simple actions. That said, disability is a complex matrix; many of these standards are not adopted as they are not relevant to specific roles or departments within businesses.

Participants discussed different strategies for increasing awareness. Since the AODA's implementation, multiple campaigns across various sectors have attempted to promote accessibility. While some have been successful, others have lost momentum. Participants discussed whether efforts should focus on enforcing compliance or rewarding excellence, though broadly agreed with the aim for certification to complement, rather than replace, regulatory requirements. Participants saw certification as a tool that could create an ongoing conversation around accessibility, signaling commitment to a deeper culture change. A system based on "ticking boxes" according to regulatory requirements would frame compliance as the ceiling, rather than the floor for businesses.

Key Questions:

– How does one measure attitudes, and how can one overcome certain attitudes that are not supportive of accessibility?
– How much effort is enough to become accessible? How does one accommodate different types of business? What are the first steps?
– How do we find a balance between establishing principles and facilitating actions?

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

Building the business case:

- Participants broadly agreed that a clear demonstration of the business case for accessibility is critical for progress
- A program focused on gradual changes would be most attractive to business and most effective in promoting accessibility.

A clear demonstration of the business case for accessibility is critical for adoption. One participant used the environmental movement as an example: criteria for "green" operations have worked in the hotel

industry as event planners use this framework as a basis for booking venues. There has been no similar uptake in the restaurant industry as there is not a solid business case, or at least one has not been made yet. The discussion is not about certification, it is about certainty for business that their investment in customer experience will pay off.

Some participants urged that messaging should move beyond the tradeoff between cost and the customer. Customer service is at the core of business, and a positive customer experience defines success. Participants noted the growing number of senior citizens as a key demographic and opportunity that businesses can reach with accessible services. Framing accessibility as a business driver and as an asset to an enterprise's brand directly links access with a company's bottom line. This mentality will be most effective if embedded in a business's service delivery model and owned by every member and employee of that business. This will reduce the short term cost of implementation and open up long term opportunities for reward.

As mentioned above, most participants thought that certification was most likely to be successful if it complemented, rather than resembled, regulation. One participant stated: "If we are going to use a checklist, we might as well just use the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act]. We want to identify excellence, the experience of it, more than a checklist. Certification needs to be saying, this is what excellence in accessibility looks like." Participants envisioned something similar to a Better Business Bureau or Excellence Canada's "Essentials", with clear fundamental steps aligning with aspirational guiding principles: "Businesses should be recognized for growing efforts to be successful. Accessibility would become something you do every day, with recognition for gradual gains". This program would be voluntary and could start with accessibility self-assessments according to a simple education-focused question: "Do you have the information/education readily available to understand accessibility?" Gradual improvement could be recognized through scoring, badges, or awards for universal design.

Businesses might be more likely to pursue certification if they have the resources to know how accessibility applies to their customers and their role within the community. Certification should account for these differences between business types, sizes, and strengths. One strategy suggested was a "personality test" to assess what elements of accessibility are relevant to the specific business and to drive the collaborative creation of an appropriate "toolset".

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

Steps to promote accessibility include:

- Creating an "Excellence Champion" playbook with clearly defined incremental steps
- Better communication with the disability community
- Demonstrating knowledge of the "lived experience" of persons with disabilities

Participants emphasized the importance of resources in developing and implementing an accessibility program. One popular idea was an accessibility "playbook" to walk businesses through the steps of becoming accessible. A complementary resource "toolset" could be collaboratively packaged using the knowledge and resources from several stakeholder groups and tailored to different types of business. Certification should consider the full range of "disabilities" and accessibility measures. Accessibility Advisory Committees could provide support and instruction on this point. A test or set of instructions to benchmark whether businesses are improving would highlight the competitive edge in embracing accessibility and define clear next steps. On the whole, simple, low-cost tools aimed at increasing awareness were seen as most likely to garner interest from business.

Promoting culture change:

- Businesses need to reframe accessibility in terms of the customer experience, not just customer service
- An accessibility model must be a "living entity" that is flexible and constantly evolving to ensure continued viability
- "Excellence Champions" across different sectors should collaborate and share best practices

In order to ensure continued viability, participants emphasized that a certification program should be a "living entity" that is fluid and constantly evolving. Pairing the model with feedback mechanisms will allow for an iterative and adaptive process, with stakeholders present at every stage of development. Collaboration and community building more generally were seen as fundamental to a successful certification model. As a starting point, access to the "lived experience" perspective of individuals facing inaccessible services could help demystify accessibility for many business owners. This could be through "advisory committees" or by employing individuals with that lived experience. Universal design principles could also serve as a useful starting point. Promoting stories that showcase how accessibility has benefitted specific individuals with a range of abilities and disabilities will humanize the issue and highlight that accessibility is good for everyone. Several participants use the following question to evaluate accessibility: "Could my 85 year old grandparent do this?"

Leadership was agreed to be a key component in promoting culture change. Several participants suggested identifying excellence champions or leaders that exhibit a superior achievement in accessibility, in turn incenting other businesses to follow suit. Stakeholders saw potential in reinforcing each other's efforts: accessibility relies on an interdependent system. One stakeholder referred to her experience in the city of Vancouver as a person with a disability and as a consumer as "beautiful" and seamless", with different infrastructure and establishments working together cohesively. Accessibility will gain more traction if seen as a community movement rather than individual initiatives.

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
Jesse Klimitz	Quadrangle Architects Ltd.
Archie Allison	Variety Village
Lois Davies	Regional Municipality of York
Kim Adeney	Regional Municipality of York
Diana Simpson	City of Mississauga
Andy Potter	Deloitte
Chris Schaefer	Uber
Jared Schachter	Uber
Pina D'Intino	Scotiabank
Scott Burton	Dolphin Digital Technologies, Inc.
Rob Harvie	Inclusive Media and Design
Russ Gahan	Excellence Canada
Karen Lablans	Scotiabank
Kevin Shaw	Zagga App
Jenny Blome	Rick Hansen Foundation
Tony Elenis	Ontario Restaurant Hotel and Motel Association

Participants continued

Terry Mundell	Greater Toronto Hotel Association
Beth Potter	Tourism Industry Association of Ontario
Nancy Bestic	Canada Standards Association
Alex Ibrahim	Accessibility Directorate
Janna Cameron	Desire 2 Learn
Robert Pearson	Accessible Media