

RACHAEL Hello, and welcome to Beyond Standards-- A Holistic Approach to Accessibility Evaluation. My
BRADLEY name is Rachael Bradley Montgomery, and we are going to start with a walk around my
MONTGOMERY: neighborhood.

Wherever I go at this point, I notice barriers to people with disabilities, and so I just want to highlight a few. This is a sidewalk where a fence has been built too close to a power pole. And that makes it inaccessible to wheelchairs, and people with walkers, and individuals who have strollers. So all of those groups of people have to walk around this telephone pole out into the street in order to go past this area.

This is a local post office with a step required for entry. Now, this building was built in the 1700s, and it hasn't been adjusted for accessibility. So individuals with disabilities in this area can't go in to this particular post office to deliver their mail. Our local library uses an electronic after-hours book drop, but the buttons are all flat. There's no Braille labels. There's no audio description. And so any individual who is blind is unable to use this to return their books.

I run into other barriers that I don't have pictures of. And one example of that is essential oil diffusers in local businesses and in our local banks so that people with chemical sensitivity can't go in and use those businesses or bank there. This is another common occurrence, and that is confusing signage. And so this accessible entrance sign is pointing at a door at the top of a set of stairs that has no door handle. It obviously is not the accessible entrance, but it leads to the question, where is that particular entrance?

But those are the kind of barriers we were running into in the physical built environment. But now after COVID-19, we're really experiencing new barriers to interacting with businesses because everything has moved online. So now we have even worse problems with inaccessible webinars and social media posts and conversations. If you go to physical buildings, you'll often find carts piled up, warning tape, entrance closures, and other makeshift barriers to movement, but no signage to help people know where to go or where the accessible pathway is, if there is one.

Hand sanitizer and cleaning solutions are everywhere, which stop people with chemical sensitivity being able to interact. Many, many businesses, restaurants, and other locations have moved to mandatory on-line ordering or mobile application ordering, as well as making

reservations online before coming to places. And all of those systems were set up in a very short period of time with little to no thought about accessibility. And finally, we are using websites more and more in this environment, and they are inaccessible often to people with disabilities.

So as we move online, just how bad is it? Well Web Aim ran an automated assessment last year to review the top million home pages. And they found that 97.8% of home pages had at least one detectable failure of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0. So the home pages, 97.8% of the sites they checked violated an international standard for accessibility. And on average, they found that pages had 59.6 errors each. So how bad is it on the web? It is pretty bad from an accessibility standpoint.

Now, if you're in the audience and you're asking yourself, is my organization legally compliant? I'm here to tell you that you're asking the wrong question. You see, despite the Americans with Disabilities Act that went into place 25 years ago, there is an employment gap that still exists. 65% of the working-age population who does not have a disability was employed prior to COVID, and that's been pretty consistent. At the same time, only about 20% or a little bit less of people with disabilities have been employed between 2009 and 2018.

And even though there's Section 501, 503, 504, 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, despite executive orders 11478 and 13160, so all these new laws that have been put into place, there is still disability-related discrimination. Within society, a 2010 report found that people with disabilities, a percentage of people with disabilities who socialized with friends, families, or neighbors at least twice a month was 11% fewer than people without disabilities. The same goes for restaurants. People with disabilities went to restaurants-- 27% fewer people than those without disabilities. The percentage of people with disabilities who attended religious services was 7% fewer than people without disabilities.

And while these statistics are older and the newer round of these statistics has not come out yet, this has been consistent. And there are indications that these are still correct from a percentage standpoint. So how do we change this? It's not just looking at the laws. We need to be asking ourselves, is your organization accessible? Is it disability-friendly?

And the question is why? Why do this? And of course, there is a legal requirement, but there's also a business requirement to this. You see 19%, give or take, of the population has a disability. That is one in three households in America includes a member with a disability. And

individuals with disabilities hold about \$200 billion in discretionary spending. So if you are not accessible, if you are excluding people with disabilities, you are missing about 20% of your possible market right off the bat.

There are also some universal benefits to being accessible. One of them is that people experience situational disabilities. I mentioned earlier about somebody who is pushing a stroller. They are having very similar experience to people who are in a wheelchair from a mobility standpoint. And accessibility features that serves somebody who is in a wheelchair or using a walker also serves someone who is pushing a cart or pushing a stroller. If you are carrying a large box into a building, ask yourself how often you use an accessible door to get in.

There are just a lot of benefits around making sure that the physical environment is accessible. Same thing with the digital environment. If you are outside on your mobile phone in the sunlight, you are having a low-vision experience. This is an experience that's going to benefit from websites that are designed to support people with low vision with sufficient contrast. In addition, our population is aging. And as we age, we experience more disabilities. Even if it is only fatigue, making sure the environment is accessible is going to support a population over a large age range.

And finally, people experience accidents. And so even if you are not permanently disabled, almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently disabled at some point in their lives. The 2017 US census found that 2.4% of the population lives with a visual disability. 3.6% of the population lives with a hearing disability. 5.1% of the population has a cognitive disability. 6.9% of the population has an ambulatory disability. 2.6% of the population lives with a disability that affects their self care. And 5.8% percent of the population lives with a disability that affects their independent living.

And while these are all US statistics that I'm pulling from, they relate to a worldwide population. If you want to be able to reach the most people possible for your organization, you should be thinking about accessibility. But with all these benefits, why are we so inaccessible? And there's some barriers. The first is cost. It takes a certain amount of money to be put aside-- preferably sooner rather than later, because the longer you go, the more expensive it costs-- to become accessible.

It also takes attention. You have to pay attention to becoming accessible, and then you have

to pay attention to remaining accessible. And all of us in this world, but particularly organizations that are smaller, have a very limited amount of attention to spend on things that are outside of the scope of their day-to-day survival. That is particularly true right now with the COVID-19 crisis.

There's also a time commitment. It takes time to think about what is accessible, what isn't accessible, and how you're going to improve. There's often grants or other opportunities to make improvement, but it takes time in order to get those.

And finally, expertise is a big barrier. If you want to have an organization that's fully accessible, you need to have expertise in architecture and all of the related physical environment regulations. You need to understand web development, social media, and electronic accessibility, as well as accommodations, and policies and procedures, and all of the practice that goes around hosting something like an accessible event. There are standards and guidelines in many of these areas, but it takes a level of expertise to know these.

So in short, the barriers to becoming accessible are more visible than the benefits to becoming accessible. And as long as that is the case, I believe we are going to be in the same situation we have been in for a number of years.

So the charity I lead, called Accessible Community, has set out to try to shift that paradigm and begin to make the benefits more visible than the barriers. And the first step to doing that is to think about accessibility from a holistic framework point, from a holistic point of view, and make all of that knowledge and expertise available to organization leaders, business owners, people who do not have the time to learn it in a way that can help them figure out how accessible they are and how to move forward.

And so we look at it holistically as, first and foremost facilities, so the built environment, which we pull from the ADA facility checklist, as well as universal design best practices. And those together create an overarching picture of what makes a good built environment for people with disabilities, as well as just people in general.

Then we look at web accessibility. And we rely on WCAG 2.0, 2.1, 2.2, and the evolving standards around web accessibility. In addition, we are looking at mobile accessibility. And that is WCAG 2.1, but also best practices from BBC, Apple, and others who have really put research into and around making the mobile space accessible.

We look at universal design best practices and Section 508 for kiosk accessibility and the accessibility of what's called self-contained products, so the kind of kiosk items that are physically independent from the web and other electronic medium. They stand on their own. We look at WCAG 2.0 for audio, video, and multimedia content. And that really includes social media, which is one of the big areas that people need to think about from an organizational standpoint.

And finally, we look at policies, and practices, and behaviors. And we pull from ADA requirements for that. We look at best practices from groups which support people with disabilities. And we look at our lessons learned from working with organizations. So we have been working to take all of that information and put it together in some kind of package that can work for individuals who do not know accessibility at an expert level.

With that in mind, another area that we have thought about from a holistic standpoint is that an organization's size changes the approach to accessibility. And I want to call out the disability equality index because it provides a wonderful support system, a wonderful evaluation tool for large organizations.

It really focuses on, what does accessibility look like for an organization that has resources and the knowledge and expertise to put towards becoming truly accessible? It is a wonderful tool. And I think every one of us is trying to work towards proposing and supporting the concept of being as accessible as possible.

But for small and medium organizations, they have a very different problem set. They have a much more limited set of resources. They have limited leverage. So whereas a really big company can go into a city or a community and ask for changes, like improvements to sidewalks, or local crosswalks, or other areas within their community. Smaller businesses don't have that kind of leverage. They often don't own their own building, or they're in historic neighborhoods and districts that have limitations on what can be done to the buildings.

They have very few specialists. Small businesses, small organizations really have one person or a few people who are doing many different jobs, so they don't have someone who can dedicate their time specifically to fixing or addressing accessibility. And in fact, when we start talking about web accessibility or social media accessibility, they often have volunteers, or friends, or somebody they hire just once to create a web page. And so going back and getting those things fixed have a different complexity level than for large organizations that have a

web team on-site. And finally, they are more likely to use tools and prepackaged content, like GoDaddy or WordPress. And so as a result, they have more limitations around what they can do to fix accessibility.

So achieving accessibility with limited resources is really about prioritizing what you're going to do. It's about making trade-offs, and it's trade-offs across different areas. So it becomes incredibly important when you start having this conversation to include people with disabilities in that conversation.

One of the number one things I hear from talking with other individuals with disabilities is the importance of engaging them as part of this process, the process of becoming more accessible. So I want to talk about two trade-off examples that I've run into. So the first one is a bookstore. It's located in a historic neighborhood. It is in a building that the owner does not own. And the front of that building, which has the main entrance, is not accessible. It has two steps up that you have to go through in order to get into the building.

Well, the building owner has a different set of priorities than the business owners in that building, and they won't fund a ramp or a lift. And so the business owners are kind of stuck at this point. They can continue to push for the building owner to make changes. But assuming they aren't going to be successful, what are they going to do with this situation?

So the other part I want to just state here is that the majority of disabled customers for this particular bookstore are from two nursing homes. And so there is a space here to make some decisions. They obviously have the option to move locations, but that is difficult, and expensive, and costs a certain amount of reputation. And so what can they do?

So a couple different things-- the first is so they can make sure their inventory is available on the web and that the web becomes an accessible portal for people who cannot get into the physical building to browse books and to still make purchases and selections. They can also offer a service which allows people to order and then come to the front door and get pick-up or have their books delivered.

This particular bookstore does incredible work as far as bringing authors in and doing events. And so another compromise they've chosen to do is to go to nursing homes and other fully accessible spaces where their customer base is and hold the events there. And so this is a set of compromises that works for their customers.

Now, there are people with disabilities who would not be comfortable with this set of compromises because they want to browse a book collection. But for this particular group, for this particular place that worked with their core customer base, moving events and delivering content and services where the individuals are really works for them. So having that conversation is extremely valuable.

This is another trade-off space. This is an ice cream store near us, and it is located in an old warehouse. When you walk in these doors, there is a set of steps that go straight up. So they don't have, again, the ability to make changes to the building itself. And so instead, they have addressed making changes to the space around the building.

Now, they have put in a ramp so that a wheelchair can go up directly next to the accessible parking space. They have put in a call button so, as soon as you get to the door, you can call. And when it's open, they have a patio space that is also accessible where you can eat your ice cream that's delivered directly down the stairs by an employee. And you can then use that off to the right. It's covered during the summer. And so this is another compromise space where they have tried to modify it to meet the needs of their community and individuals with disabilities.

Now, in both of these situations, there are people who are not going to be happy with those solutions. But these business owners are really trying to meet the needs of the people who they are interacting with. And having those conversations and continuing to evolve and improve is a great way to do this.

And especially when you start talking about, well, let's tie-in the website, let's tie in a phone service, or we're going to have policies that, when the button is rung, our employees are going to drop what they're doing, and somebody is going to come, provide service to an individual at the door. So it becomes a holistic solution that is set within the community that the business or organization is within.

And we've talked to a number of organizations that are doing solutions like this. And we have come up with a process that we are proposing and working on and trying to develop in order to both reduce barriers, but also increase rewards for organizations that are working towards becoming accessible. And our focus for our particular charity is really around the smaller and medium-sized organizations that are resource constrained.

So the first tool that is available is Ta11y. And it is ta11y.org, and it is an evaluation tool. So

that framework I talked about that addresses facilities and events and web accessibility, all of that information has been put into a single tool that walks a completely novice user through conducting an accessibility evaluation. There are instructions. There will be pictures. And it just is designed to be as easy as possible.

And one of the great benefits of putting this kind of information into a tool is that the minute you tell the tool that you don't have something, it just takes out huge portions of questions that you don't have to think about anymore. So for example, if you don't have a public restroom, it's not going to ask you questions about public restrooms.

Once you have an organization leader has completed that tool, we are working on a report that will recommend solutions. So it's going to take information from individuals who live with disabilities as well as lessons learned and known best practices, and it's going to recommend alternatives and solutions to the organization owner. We plan on hosting a platform that's tied to that that will engage the disability community, really allow business owners to ask for input and have conversations about what the right solution is for them, based on the trade-off space that's available.

We have two primary stakeholders in this. We have the organization leaders themselves, and we have disability experts. And in all of our tools, we treat disability experts as an aggregate of individuals with disabilities who have lived experience with those disabilities-- caretakers who also have lived experience and accessibility experts. And we aggregate them and do not distinguish between them, because we are trying to protect to the best of our ability the privacy rights of individuals with disabilities and be sensitive to the fact that information online can be risky.

And so the first level of defense is to not actually call that out. We do take information that they provide with permission and feed that back to organizations. Once solutions have been implemented by organizations and changes are made, we then try to take lessons learned back from them and feed it back into the tool for the next organization. So that's Ta11y, and that's the evaluation tool.

The tool we are just beginning on is called Socia11y, S-O-C-I-A-1-1-Y, and it will be at socia11y.org. And it is a user rating and review site. And so it allows disability experts to provide ratings, comments, photographs of the different organizations that they interact with. And when we talk to individuals with disabilities, and also just based on my lived experience,

there are two needs or behaviors that we really want to be able to support with a tool. And the first one is being able to save time by finding places that you can be successful.

So I live with chemical sensitivity. I go into certain stores and have to leave immediately. Sometimes I'm sick, because I didn't realize I was going to have a problem ahead of time. If somebody can recommend to me, or I can recommend to them where is risky and where is not, I have a much higher percentage chance of being successful or not getting sick when I try to do my grocery shopping or try to go clothes shopping.

Similarly, for people and individuals who are in wheelchairs or individuals who have other disabilities, there are just these barriers. And knowing where they are ahead of time saves so much time. And so it is common for people with disabilities to recommend to friends who have similar disabilities that they should try a place or not try a place. And we want to make that available on a wider scale.

This has been done in different test trials and in smaller scales, different research programs for crowdsourcing accessibility, but it hasn't been done on a large scale yet. And that is what we are aiming to do. We want to take all of that information and also plug it into a searchable interface along with the information from Tal11y, because we want organization owners and leaders to be able to tell people with disabilities that they are working in certain areas.

We want to recognize that not every organization is going to be 100% successful in supporting every group with disabilities. We want them to get there, but it's going to be a process. And so we want to be able to provide a way for organizations to let groups of people know when and what they are doing and how they're succeeding, and at the same time be able to provide that feedback back to the organization that lets them know how they're doing.

And so all of that gets put into a single searchable interface that is available to people who want to go out and interact in their community to be able to see where they're going to be successful and where they're not. And so these two tools together will provide a database for individuals to look at organizations and for organizations to visibly advertise their support.

When I go work with organizations, smaller organizations that are trying to be accessible, the number one question they get is, all right, I'm putting in the work. How do I reach a community of people with disabilities? And this platform is designed and thought out to do this.

So we are at the beginning of this. And our first tool is Tal11y. This is a screenshot of that tool.

And you will see that you start an assessment. You sign in. You can do as many assessments as you want. It is tied to Google right now for sign-in and authentication.

But on the left is a series of different sections, things like goods and services or interior routes, facility parking, web content. And each section allows you to start an assessment. And within each section, there is a question. And those questions are usually yes/no, but sometimes very simple questions like the number of parking spaces. And based on those answers, it feeds you the next question. And you have a Comments field to just capture data.

We are enhancing this over the next month or two with images that make this clearer, as well as it already includes additional instructions or clarifications that you might need. It walks you through from beginning to end of that entire process. And when you are complete, you can then request a report that will give you all of the areas that you need to improve on.

So our next steps are to continue refining Ta11y and then also build out Socia11y, which is the rating site. And both of those are going to be available. Ta11y is already available. Socia11y will be available later this year.

We will continue to test and refine. This is available to you, and we welcome all constructive feedback and assistance. If you want to try the tool out and provide comments back, you can email me directly rachael@accessiblecommunity.org, or info@accessiblecommunity.org will also make it to me.

And you can learn more. You can learn more about me and my background at LinkedIn-- and the LinkedIn profile is here as a link-- and at the charity, which is accessiblecommunity.org. We are passionate about making our communities accessible to everyone and making sure that people with disabilities are able to succeed and successfully engage in their communities in a way that allows them to give back to the community and also actively participate.

Thank you very much, for your time.