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Understanding Accessibility:
An Insider's Perspective

By Juan Olarte, CEO of Digita11y Accessible Inc.

Growing up in Colombia during the 80s, I faced unique challenges due to my visual impairment. Born with a disability, I wasn't completely blind, but my vision was limited. In a country where support for disabilities was minimal, I had to rely on creative solutions to participate in daily activities. While this fostered problem-solving skills, it also meant I found it difficult to excel academically due to the lack of proper support.

In 2000, my life took a significant turn when I immigrated to Canada. It was here that I discovered the world of assistive technology, which not only improved my daily life but also sparked a deep passion for accessibility. This newfound technology allowed me to excel in areas I previously struggled with and opened doors to opportunities I had never imagined.

My personal experiences have profoundly shaped my perspective on digital accessibility. As someone who has navigated the world with a visual impairment, I understand the barriers inaccessible content creates. These obstacles prevent individuals from having equal access to information and participating fully in the digital world. This realization fueled my mission to help organizations create more accessible digital products.

My journey has also influenced my approach to accessibility in design and technology. Early in my career, I learned the importance of integrating accessibility from the very beginning of any project. My experiences have taught me that accessibility needs are diverse, and working closely with individuals with different disabilities requires empathy and understanding. This approach ensures a more inclusive and accessible experience for all users.

> *"To other professionals looking to incorporate accessibility into their work, my advice is simple: start small and involve people with disabilities early on."*

Convincing organizations to prioritize accessibility wasn't easy at first. Even with legislations like the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), for many organizations in North America accessibility is still an afterthought. However, I realized that presenting a strong business case for accessibility could change perspectives. By demonstrating how early integration of accessibility leads to better project outcomes, clearer requirements, and improved development processes, I was able to show the tangible benefits. This shift in approach led to wider acceptance and implementation of accessibility practices across various industries.

Staying updated on the latest accessibility standards and practices is a continuous process. It's a cycle of reading new and proposed standards, exploring emerging technologies, and constantly learning. My passion for accessibility makes this journey enjoyable, as each new piece of knowledge helps me advocate more effectively for inclusive design.

To other professionals looking to incorporate accessibility into their work, my advice is simple: start small and involve people with disabilities early on. Understand that disabilities are diverse, and gaining different perspectives is crucial.

> *"Accessibility isn't just about compliance; it's about creating better, more inclusive experiences for everyone."*

Through my work I strive to make a significant impact ensuring that digital products are accessible to all. My mission is to foster a more inclusive digital world.

Juan Olarte, CEO of Digita11y Accessible Inc., has over 20 years of experience in technology and accessibility. Being visually impaired himself, he understands firsthand the obstacles people with disabilities face when content is not accessible. This understanding drives his passion for creating inclusive digital experiences. His diverse roles as a developer, product owner, and tester have given him a unique insight into accessibility challenges. This inspired him to develop an accessibility framework that is now the foundation of A11Yn, the company's AI-powered platform. Under his leadership, Digita11y Accessible Inc. strives to make the digital world accessible to all.

Seeing the Unseen: Philosophical Foundations[1] for Including Invisible Disabilities

By Dr. Hitu Sood, WINS Founder & Executive Director

From the ancient wisdom of Aristotle to the enduring legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, the philosophical foundations of inclusion resonate across centuries and cultures. Aristotle's assertion that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" underscores the value of every individual in the collective effort. Each person's unique perspective and experience enriches the fabric of our workplaces and communities. Meanwhile, Gandhi's vision of unity in diversity serves as a reminder of our shared humanity and the importance of embracing our differences.

Inclusion involves recognizing the inherent dignity of every person and acknowledging that our differences are integral to the human experience. When we celebrate the unique contributions of each individual, we foster a more vibrant and enriched workplace. Understanding that every person's journey is different allows us to add to the collective wisdom of our community. We are all unique threads in the tapestry of humanity, each with our own color and texture, woven together to create something beautiful. Yet, despite our understanding of inclusion, we often overlook individuals with invisible disabilities in our workplaces.

Introduction

Invisible disabilities, such as mental health disorders, chronic pain, and learning disabilities, are often not immediately apparent to others. Consequently, employees with these conditions may be reluctant to disclose them in the workplace due to fears of stigma, misunderstanding, or discrimination. This fear of disclosure can prevent them from receiving the accommodations and support they need to thrive.

According to the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability by Statistics Canada, approximately 16% of the working-age population in Canada, or about 4.2 million people, report having at least one disability. Of these, 3.5% have an invisible disability such as anxiety, depression, or learning disabilities. These numbers highlight the importance of creating supportive workplaces where all employees feel comfortable disclosing their needs and seeking the accommodations that can help them succeed.

According to a 2021 survey by Mental Health Research Canada, 68% of Canadian employees reported experiencing increased stress and anxiety during the pandemic. Post-pandemic data suggests that these issues persist. A 2023 Microsoft Work Trend Index reveals that 47% of Canadian workers experience daily burnout, a significant increase from previous years, and over 50% report feeling stressed on an average workday (IT World Canada). Additionally, a report by Slack indicated that three out of four workers experienced burnout in the past year, with two out of five employees doubting their employers' concern for their mental health (HCAMag). These statistics underscore the importance of organizational efforts in promoting psychological safety and well-being.

47% EXPERIENCE DAILY BURNOUT

50% STRESSED DURING AVG. WORKDAY

The question arises, what can organizations do to mitigate these issues? While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, here are a few useful tips:

Fostering an Inclusive Culture with Human Values

At the heart of an inclusive culture are basic human values: respect, empathy, and consideration. To build a psychologically safe environment, organizations must promote a culture of:

RESPECT

This involves recognizing and honoring the unique experiences and truths of each individual. It's important to understand that what might be true for one person might be entirely different for another. Listening to and respecting each person's perspective, even when there are disagreements, is essential to creating a culture of inclusion.

EMPATHY

Empathy involves being aware of and sensitive to others' circumstances and challenges. Each of us experiences the world differently, and by making an effort to understand these differences, we can create a more welcoming and supportive workplace.

CONSIDERATION

This means acknowledging that people have different lived experiences and realities. Taking the time to listen and consider what others tell us about their lives and experiences is key to fostering an environment where everyone feels seen and valued.

Organizations can create a supportive environment that empowers employees to share their challenges and seek the support they need.
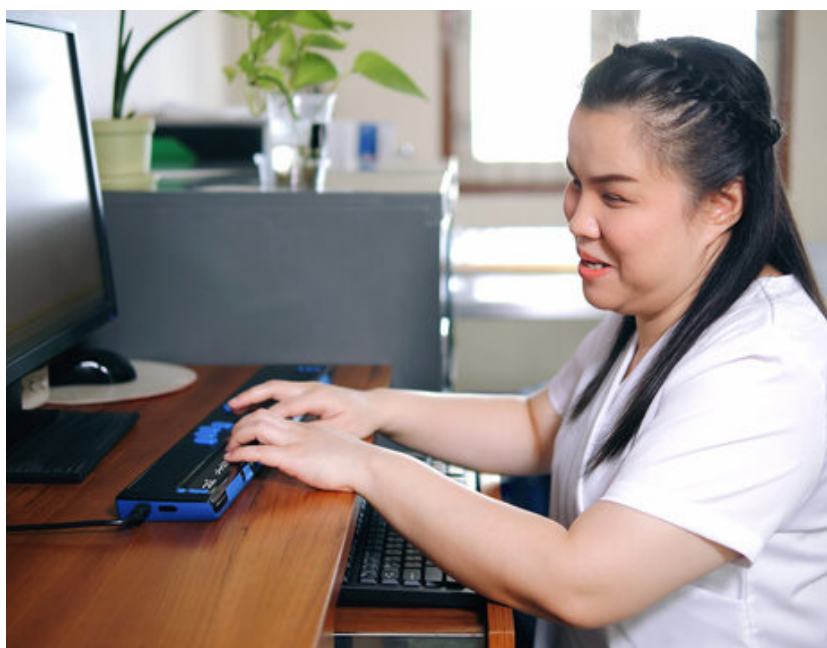
Implementing Clear Policies and Procedures

To support these values, organizations should have transparent and accessible policies that make employees feel safe to disclose their disabilities:

Confidentiality:
Employees must know that their disclosures will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and that they have the right to privacy. Clear communication about the processes and protections in place can help build trust.

Flexible Accommodations:
A one-size-fits-all approach rarely works. Instead, offer a variety of accommodation options and be open to suggestions from employees about what they need to succeed. This flexibility shows consideration for individual differences and respects each employee's unique situation.

Statistics Canada reports that only 59% of people with disabilities in the workplace have their accommodation needs met.[2] This indicates a significant gap between what employees need and what they are provided, underscoring the importance of flexible and responsive accommodation policies.

Providing Training and Education

Education is a powerful tool for fostering understanding and compassion. Organizations can provide training that focuses on:

Understanding Invisible Disabilities:
Training should cover the various types of invisible disabilities, how they can affect individuals, and the types of accommodations that may be helpful. This knowledge helps to build empathy and awareness among all employees.

Communication Skills:
Managers should be trained to have sensitive and supportive conversations about disabilities and accommodations. Effective communication is critical to building trust and encouraging open dialogue.

Creating a Safe Space for Disclosure

A psychologically safe environment is one where employees feel comfortable disclosing their disabilities. To create this safe space, organizations should:

Establish Trust:
Trust is built when organizations consistently demonstrate a commitment to supporting employees with disabilities. This includes providing accommodations promptly and following through on promises.

Anonymous Reporting:
Offering anonymous channels for employees to disclose their disabilities or suggest accommodations can reduce the fear of stigma or retaliation.

Highlighting Success Stories:
Sharing success stories of employees who have disclosed their invisible disabilities and received support can inspire others to come forward.

These stories can be shared through:

Internal Newsletters:
Featuring stories in newsletters, company meetings, or on the company intranet helps to

normalize the conversation around disabilities and accommodations.

Recognition Programs:
Recognizing and celebrating the achievements of employees with disabilities reinforces the message that the organization values diversity and inclusion.

Conclusion

A culture of trust and support is essential for employees with invisible disabilities to feel empowered and valued. In prioritizing connectedness and openness, we foster an environment where everyone feels safe to express their authentic self.

Promoting human values of respect, empathy, and compassion, we not only build inclusive workplaces but also contribute to the greater good of a more accepting society. As Mahatma Gandhi wisely noted, "Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization." Let us strive to pass this test by treating each other with the kindness and understanding that we all deserve, making our workplaces—and the world—a safer place for everyone to be their true self.

The Diversity Forum

WINS

Diversity is Strength

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