

What Businesses Should Learn From “A Life Worth Living’s” Accessible Website Journey

Speakers: Judy Robinet and David Best

Moderator: Randy Oldham

Randy Oldham:

Okay. Hey everyone. I'd like to welcome you to the University of Guelph's Virtual Accessibility Conference. First off, I'd like to thank you for your support of this conference. Your attendance is what makes this possible. We would also like to thank our conference sponsors, Crawford Technologies, D2L, Fable, Mohawk College and The Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs for their invaluable contributions to this conference. Without their sponsorship, we would not be able to bring such quality programming to you. We are excited to have you join this session which is “What Businesses Should Learn from a Life Worth Living's Accessible Website Journey.” And I'm joined here with Judy Robinet and David Best and also Steve, who's behind the scenes as a wizard on their side making sure everything goes smoothly and Carolyn on my side too who's there making sure everything goes great on our side.

Randy Oldham:

This session will be 45 minutes in length including questions and answers. If you would like to enable closed captioning, you can click the CC button at the bottom of your screen in the Zoom menu bar now. Questions can be typed into the Q and A tab which is down there as well. We ask that you please wait until the designated Q and A period to submit your questions to avoid presenter screen reader callouts during the presentation. If you would like to download the Zoom transcript, you'll have an opportunity to do that before the end of this session. Otherwise, the post-conference recordings will include captioning, and transcripts will be shared after the conference. If we get disconnected, we will do our best to get online. If we are unable to, you are welcome to join another session as you will not be disrupting that session by doing so. Without further ado, I'd like to introduce you to your presenters, Judy Robinet and David Best. Over to you, Judy and David.

Judy Robinet:

Hi, I'm Judy Robinet. I'm executor director of A Life Worth Living. I'm fair-haired. I'm eligible to be retired. I'm wearing a black cardigan with a graphic turtleneck, and I'm in our podcast room at Clear Rock Studios where we do our podcasts. Over to you, David.

David Best:

Hello and thank you for joining us today. I'm David Best, and I work as an accessibility IT specialist. I recently retired from IBM, and I've served on the Ontario Government Accessibility Standards Advisory Council and currently on the Communications Committee. But I focus most of my time now in supporting small and medium sized business with understanding usable digital accessibility communications. Because we now live in a virtual world, and digital communications that is usable and accessible, is extremely important. I haven't looked in the mirror lately, but I have long hair with a graying beard, and I'm told I have a burgundy shirt.

Judy Robinet:

Okay, well let's get ready, and we will start sharing our screen for our presentation. What Businesses Should Learn from a Life Worth Living's Accessible Website Journey by Judy Robinet, Master's of Special Education, orientation mobility, early childhood education and David Best, Bachelor of Science, accessibility, IT specialist. The 13th annual University of Guelph Virtual Accessibility Conference, May 25th, 2022. Today's focus. Using A Life Worth Living's business as a case study, we will highlight real world challenges and provide best practice solutions to avoid expensive and noncompliant sites.

David Best:

Number one, identify the meaning of digital accessibility in terms of your business goals.

Unidentified Speaker:

A photo collage of people from toddlers to seniors with hearing, vision, motor and cognitive loss playing instruments, racing or playing with family and friends.

Judy Robinet:

As executive director of A Life Worth Living, I bring decades of end user experience in academic education to the field of accessibility. Working with disabled people from birth to 21 to seniors. I am well aware of the barriers. Although our website with the tagline, let's change the disability narrative one story at a time is designed to teach the general public, we particularly want the content to be available to disabled users too.

Unidentified Speaker:

A photo of David using his Braille display while working on his laptop.

Judy Robinet:

What I couldn't possibly know is how to personally code and evaluate an accessible and usable website. I knew I needed digital accessibility expertise. David Best, while working for IBM as an accessibility IT specialist accepted our invitation to sit on our advisory council. In 2009, we both approached IBM to build A Life Worth Living an accessible site, but at \$40,000, their fee was just out of our reach. We searched in vain for a company that would build us an accessible website. In 2013, another web developer agreed to work with David but in the end was unwilling to follow his instructions. In 2018, David and I agreed A Life Worth Living couldn't wait any longer. We hired an award-winning web development company willing to build their first accessible website. I will call them X. Cost was \$13,500.

David Best:

The first step in establishing a digital presence in the virtual world is to identify your understanding of digital accessibility. We understood the disability user experience and the need for accessible digital communications from our lived experiences. In the early days of our journey, the AODA legislation had just been implemented in 2005. And accessibility at that time was a new concept and perceived to be a business burden. Over the past decade, our biggest battles were in confronting misleading and fearful attitudes towards digital accessibility.

David Best:

Although we had identified the ALWL goals and the ALWL website accessibility criteria, the arrogant attitude of website vendors continued to treat accessibility features as an add-on to their design. We learnt that a knowledgeable accessibility specialist on staff or contracted resource is an asset when negotiating with a website vendor to determine their level of accessibility skills. Number two, determine how digital accessibility can augment your business goals, values and target expectations through implementing a digital accessibility strategy.

Judy Robinet:

At our first strategy and planning meeting, William McRae, our secretary, David Best from our Advisory Council and I insisted that X comply with the WCAG 2.0 in effect at the time, or we could not move forward legally or ethically. X was sure they could develop a compliant site, although they had never heard of this law nor was accessibility part of their educational program. David also advocated that accessibility should be built into the site from the start and suggested that he be given Sandbox Development privileges to assist along the way. But access coder felt he would contact David as needed.

Judy Robinet:

As a coder, David also offered to provide them accessibility training, but they did not respond. In order to meet our mandate, we needed our resource library and training courses to be accessible and engaging for all. By doing so, our users would have their questions on living with a disability answered, and disability inclusion would be promoted in a home, workplace and community. An accessible website was imperative before we could launch.

David Best:

Once you have identified your digital accessibility expectations, you need to determine how an accessibility strategy can be implemented within your business framework. After ALWL established a contract with website vendor X, it became clear that vendor X did not have the accessibility coding skills or even an understanding of the user experience beyond the visual interface, although an award winning website vendor, vendor X had misrepresented their capabilities and willingness to learn the digital accessibility requirements.

David Best:

The website vendor must understand your business brand and involve you in the design before any development begins. In our case, vendor X did not appreciate the business value of accessibility. Number three, examine your business culture to assess premeditated actions, the anticipating of others' behaviour and the purposeful design of coordinated actions.

Judy Robinet:

Based on our continued conversations with X, I anticipated that David's assistance would be well-received and that they would jump on the opportunity to learn from an expert. Although there was a verbal commitment to access David's expertise, X have not contacted David. March 8th, 2019, X informed me that the site was ready for testing, but they did not deliver. So they fixed the site. May 2019, X advised us that they were delivering an accessible site. Before the final payment, I engaged Inclusive Design Research Centre to do an independent manual and automated testing at approximately \$2,373. We failed.

David Best:

The third step is to examine your business culture to ensure business partners understand your brand and expectations. Unfortunately, more ALWL time was spent in explaining accessibility techniques and usability interfaces rather than on productive development. That is ALWL was paying site vendor X for their accessibility training.

Despite our efforts, vendor X did not understand the concept that accessibility is a measure of productivity, and productivity defines usability for those with or without a disability. So accessibility testing cannot be performed at the end of the development cycle. But rather, there must be several iterations of refinement.

Unidentified Speaker:

Beside the slide text is an image of a bridge spanning the water reaching the land on the other side.

David Best:

Accessibility is about enabling people to perceive information, to understand that information and to gain meaningful knowledge from that information.

Unidentified Speaker:

Beside the slide text, an image of a bridge that doesn't meet. On either side of the gap are engineers and construction workers looking over to the other side.

David Best:

That is, usability is concerned with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction of your customers not technical and legal criteria. Functional and usability testing are two separate tasks and require several iterations to ensure development is progressing according to expectations. Although we had clearly expressed our expectations, we learnt that it is necessary to examine more fully the website vendor's cultural attitudes, development processes and willingness to work with accessibility specialists. Understanding these important relationship building concepts will help with anticipating development problems and unexpected costs.

Unidentified Speaker:

A photo of various people using their large screen software, rollerball, adaptive keyboard or Braille display.

David Best:

However, there was an obvious gap in understanding what needed to be done. X didn't know what they didn't know and was blind to the fact. Number four, develop best practice digital communication strategies to market product and services and build a unique brand to reach a diverse population with satisfied customers.

Judy Robinet:

When we notified X of the failed audits, they requested additional fees as they had to do revisions to the site. David advised that the client is not responsible for the number of accessibility iterations to a project lifecycle. Lack of accessibility training or project inefficiencies are not the client's problems. However, client beware. The first shock was that X questioned the credibility of an independent tester. X could not read the audit report, nor could they remedy the errors. X stated that the consultant that we have used for the second review has sent a report that is not comprehensive, appears automated and profiles items that are not necessary for standard accessibility.

Judy Robinet:

Then X blamed our team for the failures. They claimed their team worked with David to follow his lead and relevant knowledge throughout the process, and all recommendations he provided were followed through. X also complained that the audit used automated testing to which David responded, that automated testing should have been used at the functional testing phase and not at the end user testing phase. In any case, the automated testing is valid and is very specific regarding WCAG success criteria failures.

Judy Robinet:

Again, X wanted additional funds for corrections. And once we clarified for them how to remedy the errors, X would give us a fair estimate for the additional work. David advised them that the audit provided them with the required changes and reminded them that the agreement was to deliver a WCAG-AA compliant website. X notified me that they were ready to launch the site. However, the site failed end user and automated testing again. Though the site was live, A Life Worth Living could not advertise our site was launched. What X said was fixed was not. David created a video demo of the subsequent audit issues to give them a better understanding of the errors. X found that took too much time out of their day. Our site was still inaccessible. In early October 2020, X wanted me to provide them with another OCAD [phonetic] audit.

Judy Robinet:

Another audit was cost prohibitive. X attached the updated Google Lighthouse audit reporting the site was 100% compliant with WCAG standards. On October 17th, David said there were still too many accessibility errors, and the Google Lighthouse automated audit requires a follow up manual testing as well. David could not read the Lighthouse report as it was not screen reader accessible. So on October 26th, David did another manual audit, and there were still errors.

David Best

The fourth step is to develop best practice policies that will integrate digital accessibility throughout the business organization from design and development to marketing and training to sales and procurement. ALWL's communication strategy is to deliver information via multiple accessible modes of communication, visually, audibly and tactilely. ALWL intent is to communicate with as many people as possible, not just those who have vision. ALWL's business goal is to educate businesses and the general public in the real life experiences of people with disabilities to promote disability inclusion in an effort to improve the quality of life. The challenge was that website vendor X did not understand the ALWL brand. That is, vendor X's focus was on marketing themselves and not the ALWL brand generating revenue not abilities. Number five, evaluate the vendor's ability to deliver an accessible and useable website to maximize your business investment.

Judy Robinet:

In November 2020, X said they incurred \$29,000 in billable updates trying to meet minimum accessibility requirements. David reminded them that updates is an inaccurate descriptor for correcting accessibility errors. November 6th, 2020, I wrote to X to say that I had enjoyed working with them, but their team needed digital and content accessibility training. WCAG 2.0 is not only about compliance. It's about human rights and dignity, locally, provincially, nationally and globally. Therefore we looked for another solution. But where do we look? Since the company David was doing inclusive design with and his other colleagues were not available, David referred X to an experienced web development company outside of Toronto to correct the remaining errors.

Judy Robinet:

In the end, A Life Worth Living hired CMS Solutions. After repairing our site, the web developer said to remedy the remaining errors would break the site. We had to refresh our site. After spending \$13,500 to develop our site, over \$6,000 in audits and repairs, on March 30th, 2021, we launched our accessible website for \$6,000.

David Best:

The final step in establishing an accessible digital presence in the virtual world is to evaluate the website vendor's ability to comply with your expectations and not what they think you need. After more than two years, ALWL still did not have an AODA compliant website. Vendor X had failed to embrace the ALWL brand. Assessing the situation, ALWL terminated the contract with website vendor X and went looking for another vendor. An accessibility specialist has in depth knowledge in the accessibility consulting world and can be a valuable asset in your toolbox.

David Best:

Since I have over the past few decades engaged many website vendors, I can evaluate their underlying culture and attitudes. There are very few that I can recommend but found CMS Solution vendor a good match for the ALWL business brand. Embracing the five steps from A Life Worth Living, learning experience will allow your organization to be in control of design, development, testing and escalating costs when implementing a website. The COVID pandemic over the past few years has accelerated the business motives to implement digital accessibility, but the level of understanding the end user experience is still a big challenge in achieving full inclusion.

Judy Robinet:

This experience was a significant motivator for our business accessibility toolkit, BAT as we like to call it, with actionable AODA compliance training, templates to create your accessibility policies and a portal to professional skillset training. For more information, visit alifeworthliving.ca.

Randy Oldham:

Excellent, thank you very much Judy and David.

Judy Robinet:

You're welcome. Thank you.

Randy Oldham:

We are now open for questions, so if folks want to use the Q and A button at the bottom of your screen, you can click on that and enter a question and hit send, and I will be able to ask questions of Judy and David. While we wait for someone to enter a question, I'll just, I'll say one/ask one. I think to me it's just really sad that you guys sort of gave them the grading scheme at the beginning of the project and said this is how we're evaluating the final product. And they said yeah, yeah, yeah, we got it. And then didn't deliver that final product according to that grade scheme. And it's just surprising that, you know, if you're that clear about what you're looking for and then they're still not hitting it, like what's wrong with them on their side, you know?

David Best:

Well, you know, Randy, the surprising thing is 10 years later we're still struggling with the fact that a lot of companies out there that are developing communication systems like websites still do not understand what accessibility is really all about. And for those that do, they focus on the technical and legal standards and totally ignore the end user

experience. And as you probably know, you can have a compliant website technically and still not be usable.

Randy Oldham:

Yeah, absolutely. My favourite example of that are tables on websites. So you know, you can put data, the WCAG says, you know, only use tables for things that tables should be used for, like data, not for design. But tables are still a horrendous experience with anyone, for anyone using a screen reader, regardless of the content inside of it. So if there's a way you can do that without using a table, all the better for anyone who's accessing that website.

Judy Robinet:

Yeah. To add to that, Randy, for a business such as mine, whose whole heart and passion and life has been spent on disability inclusion, I feel for those businesses out there that are being penalized or reprimanded for not having accessible sites, because it's very difficult to find a good development company that would do it. And if you do not have the training, which you shouldn't have to have as a business, how can you assess that? We had thought that we had hit the nail on the head by going to this company who had a good team and was award winning and thought that they could do this. And I wanted somebody in my locality. I wanted to work with businesses near me.

Randy Oldham:

Yeah.

Judy Robinet:

So I think it's important, and that's why I think our business accessibility toolkit is going to be wonderful with their training courses because we will be able to give businesses not only the why, the what and the when, we will give you the how.

Randy Oldham:

Yeah, that's a good point. I think, you know, a related analogy I think would be when you hire an electrician in Ontario, you expect that they're going to be following all of the required guidelines for electrical work in Ontario. And you sort of take that for granted maybe when you do it. Same sort of thing as what you guys experienced working with company X is, you know, hey, we want a website that meets accessibility requirements. You do that, right. And oh yeah, sure. And then it's like okay, well we have to trust that you do that. You had a David within your pocket to help you recognize when things were not going right. But like you said, your average business won't have that same David in their pocket.

Judy Robinet:

Well can you imagine you have someone who's telling you, you have \$29,000 owing in updates?

Randy Oldham:

No.

Judy Robinet:

And it's not updates, it's trying to bring this site into accessibility, and I still didn't have an accessible site. They couldn't launch. And I can go person to person and do my job. But my job is actually to have an online presence with production and media.

Absolutely.

Judy Robinet:

And if you cannot have that accessible and usable by people with disabilities, you're doing a disservice when you're saying to people be inclusive, and you aren't.

Randy Oldham:

Yeah, and you're excluding a very wide swath of customers. Okay, we have some questions that have come in. I don't think you'll be able to answer this one, but I'll ask it anyways. So who is X, and are they still in business? Maybe you could just answer the latter and not the former. I'll leave it to you guys.

Judy Robinet:

X is still in business. And they are in the United States and three places in Ontario. They've been in business over 30 years. I will not give you the name because my goal is not to denigrate a company. My goal is to provide you with some strategies to not fall into the trap I was in hoping that someone in our community who said that they could do the job and wanted to do the job and was willing to work with David and, yes, they would do everything to make it accessible and didn't. But I won't tell you X. I just can't.

Randy Oldham:

That's understandable. And I think maybe the important thing for the folks attending this presentation is just to keep in mind that this wasn't just a mom-and-pop shop operating out of a basement. This sounds like it was a very large company, like you said, with extensive like 30 years' experience doing this work. Well, doing this work web design. Perhaps not doing this work accessibly.

Judy Robinet:

Right. There are award winning in both in the states and in Ontario and Canada. They've done some really great work. And some of that work has been for colleges.

Randy Oldham:

Yeah.

Judy Robinet:

And you're sitting back and saying we need to step in and work with the colleges so that they understand more about training their students and their staff and their professors in IT to produce for us web developers and graphic designers who can do the job and not put the company at risk. Because bottom line, the company is at risk.

Randy Oldham:

Absolutely.

Judy Robinet:

And somebody who should be sued, it's not the company. It should be the developer.

Randy Oldham:

Yeah.

Judy Robinet:

But the company is the one who gets sued.

Randy Oldham:

Yeah. Okay, we've got a couple of comments here, so Kaitlyn Fear said "thank you for sharing your story. This is helpful to know. There are many companies out there who misrepresent their accessibility knowledge and skills."

Reagan Thomas says not a question, however. "This presentation was eye opening and full of wonderful information to take back and share with my team. Thank you."

Judy Robinet:

Thank you.

David Best:

Just one comment, Randy. You know the thing that we experienced, and I think many, many people out there in small business experienced, but we never hear about it, is that people that go through school to become designers design according to what their perspective is. And we see this all the time. We see this even in buildings when Ryerson

developed their student centre, it was developed by an award-winning company. And what happened when it was done, there was all kinds of accessibility complaints about the way the stairs were and the objects in the hall because blind persons couldn't figure where things were. And it just goes to show you that we have to get back into the schools and get designers to learn not the technical things but the human behaviour, how humans interact with things around them.

Randy Oldham:

Great point. I have a question from Christopher. "Are there any, are there general guidelines and policies for digital accessibility? Is there anything taught in the design training process as to what exactly this means?"

Judy Robinet:

Well I think that you all have to enrol in our BAT course.

Randy Oldham:

Excellent, excellent segue.

David Best:

Just to comment on that is I always try to get designers to understand that there is a bridge between accessibility and usability. Accessibility is about the technical requirements. It's about the technology used, and there's, and websites are interoperability of browsers and screen readers and video players. That's all about things like performance, security and accessibility. At the other end of the bridge you have the end users and how they use that technology. So and that's about effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction. And so somewhere in that strategy when you're looking at building a website, try to understand what your business brand is and how you want to connect the accessibility with usability and make sure that the designers understand that expectation.

Randy Oldham:

Yeah, that's a great point, David. I'm often reminded working in web myself that a lot of times those things that we do to fix the accessibility of a site also have a significant improvement to the UX, the user experience, as well. A really great example is you know when you go to news websites, especially news websites, when the whole page popup shows up and you have to click a tiny little X to close it to get back to the page. Well, you know, that's irritating no matter who you are. But it becomes a keyboard trap if you're using a screen reader and using tab navigation, right. So it's a great example of not only is this a great fix for accessibility, but it's an amazing fix, too, for every single person and usability.

David Best:

Absolutely.

Randy Oldham:

A question from Colin Spencer. "What a struggle. Seems to be a trend with accessibility after watching a few of these webinars. It's a shame it isn't more standardized across the board. Does the AODA not have any jurisdiction in this area?"

David Best:

That's a good question. I could answer that in many different ways. But basically, the AODA outlines specifications that are technical and legal in nature. They do not tell you how to do it. And that's where the big gap is in people are told they have to make communications accessible, but they're not told how to do it. And I think that's where the big challenge comes in. And the struggle that I have with this whole thing is that the area of accessibility consulting is not regulated. Everybody and anybody is an expert. So it's up to you as the business owner to have a basic understanding of what your brand is and what you want rather than letting some accessibility consultant tell you what you need.

Randy Oldham:

Great point. Thank you, David.

Judy Robinet:

And we need to have more people, more companies that are verified and certified to be accessible usable developers. And we don't have that. You have 381,000 small and medium companies in Ontario. Even if you use the handful of people who can provide you with that accessible usable website, they can't, how many years before the 381st thousand company can access you? So we have to work within the schools, within the graduates, within the companies that provide it. They need training, and they need to be aware they need training.

Randy Oldham:

Great point. Thank you, Judy. Similarly, and relatedly, James asks, "should there be a certification process to be a provider of accessible web services similar to other disciplines so you can have more assurances?"

Judy Robinet:

I think that I'll let you answer that one, David.

David Best:

Yeah, there's been attempts at creating certification. And I know in the US there are some programs that will give training to certify you as an accessibility specialist. We don't have anything in Canada that's recognized, but certification really goes only as far as the eye of the beholder. And I think maybe what we need to get Ontario government to think about is that if people are going to consider themselves an accessibility consultant that maybe we need some sort of apprenticeship or training certification like you would have, as you said, Randy, with electricians. You know, they have to pass certain levels of standards. So we need something like that in Ontario if we want Ontario to reach the goal of full inclusion.

Judy Robinet:

So what we're doing with our business accessibility toolkit and professional training courses in the meantime, we have people who have been certified. We have people who we have experience with as elevated the usability of content and sites and housed with understanding. One of those is David Best. So we have coding, we have content, we have audio description. What we want to do is while we're waiting for all of this to happen, which never happens as fast, that a company could say oh yeah, here's one. Here's a group that we find has provided us with not only accessible compliant material but also usable. And so that's why we started that, as I said, because I feel for businesses who can't determine whether a company who says I can do it or I can't, can't determine that. And then we will help in the meantime until all of these certifications and changes are made. Because I want companies to have that confidence. I want people to launch, and I want the people I work with to not be restricted from work, from play, from leisure, from using their appliances. There's a lot of digital communication out there that's not accessible. So that is our hope and our plan. And.

Randy Oldham:

Okay, I've got a comment from Douglas Palmer and a question from Douglas Palmer. And then that will bring to the end our question period. So the comment from Douglas Palmer. "Thank you for your presentation. Some organizations say their websites are accessible, but problems still exist. I agree we need to be able to communicate with students these problems." And then Douglas Palmer's question, "do you have any good messaging tips when reaching out to organizations?"

David Best:

Yeah, I'm not quite sure where to take that. Yes, the thing that I like to stress is that a, the person or the company looking to build a website understand what their own goals are, their own values, before you go to a website to ask for accessibility. Because you

wanted to be integrated right into your business operation to make it an investment, not a cause for disability accommodation but an actual investment that not only supports disabilities but everybody that comes to your website. So what I try to get organizations to understand is to start off with understanding your brand, your expectations, your values and your goals and then look at how you build in the accessibility requirements that you want in that strategy.

Judy Robinet:

And one thing I'd like to add to that is that you're not going to be perfect. It's not going to be perfect. I don't want businesses to hold back. That's what I did for years. I held back. Well, I want the perfect site. Let's start. Let's put our foot over the water. Let's start moving and proceed to excellence and hopefully in the end perfection. But if we wait for perfection, I still would not have a site.

Randy Oldham:

Yeah, that's a great point.

Judy Robinet:

In fact, let's just start there. Let's just go. Let's make a move. Let's make it open. Let's leave no one behind.

Randy Oldham:

Absolutely. Thank you very much Judy and David and also behind the scenes Steve and Carolyn.