



Accessibility & Inclusion @ Telstra

Beyond the conversation: A culture of accessibility takes root at Telstra

When Sandra Cutajar, a program manager with Telstra Digital, tried to turn on the gesture-based screen reader on her smartphone, she was disappointed. What should have been a simple one-step exercise wound up involving a series of taps, triple clicks, multi-finger swipes – and yet still no voice reading out the content of her screen.

By the end of the exercise, held as part of Telstra's Accessibility Empathy Labs in December, Sandra could feel the frustration.

"Imagine having to do this for the first time if

you were blind," said Sandra. "We like to think that we're making life easier for people with disability, but we need to do so much more."

Australia's leading telecommunications and information services company has a significant responsibility when it comes to helping people with disability optimise their technology.

"Mobile tech may be evolving at a rate of knots, but the ways in which we're enabling people with disability to use it still has a long way to go," shares Amir Ansari, Director of User Experience at Transpire, Telstra's partner in our Accessibility Immersion training.

"You have to jump through several hoops to do anything," he said of the smartphone screen reader exercise at our latest Empathy Lab.





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Sandra Cutajar

“Unless you have an accessibility shortcut set up, it’s very difficult to get somewhere specific – and there’s always a risk of activating something you’re not aware of.”

While there have been great leaps forward in apps for people with disability, and many have welcomed the emphasis on individual choice that underpins the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the reality is that people living with disability are still perceived by some as being incapable of demanding jobs or complex problem-solving – when their life stories so often point to the very opposite being true.

Taking a lead

At the beginning of a new decade, and at the conclusion of our first Accessibility & Inclusion Plan, Telstra is driving this conversation and taking the time to reflect.

Over the past three years, our Accessibility & Inclusion Program has helped to bring accessibility into the mainstream of Telstra’s operations, through a range of new working practices and standards, employee training, awareness-raising events, advisory committees, and digital R&D initiatives.

The result has seen a number of improvements in the past 12 months, during which:

- We delivered a major update to our internal Disability and Accessibility Policy to better explain what we expect from our people and the business;
- We provided more jobs to people with disability, and continued to be the largest host of interns through the Australian Network on Disability’s (AND’s) Stepping Into program;
- We established a new disabled employee representative group, TelstrAbility, as a central point of contact and advocacy for employees living with disability and their allies;
- We hosted several well-attended events for employees interested in learning more about accessibility, including a live-streamed, [simulcast panel](#) to mark International Day of People with Disability (IDPWD);
- Telstra and Transpire launched [AppsForAll](#), a website to help app developers and owners find advice and resources to make their apps fully accessible;
- We appointed a Digital Accessibility Manager to put accessibility at the forefront of Telstra’s Digital Systems operations.

Principles of change

Through all these initiatives, there has been a growing acceptance of several fundamental principles that underpin Telstra's accessibility and inclusion work going forwards.

First is the need to double down on our efforts to canvas the views of people with disability in our efforts to become more accessible – whether it's developing more inclusive apps, testing products with more people or becoming a more accessible employer.

As Amy Whalley, Deputy CEO of AND, noted when addressing Telstra employees at our [IDPWD event](#): “Asking the person what they need is the biggest innovation we can adopt.”

Ben Pintos-Oliver, GM of Digital Systems at Telstra, said the company could not underestimate the importance of talking to the millions of Australians who identify as living with disability, and “understanding their day-to-day journeys”.

“We need to be talking to people with cataracts, people who've lost a hand, people with different cognitive abilities,” Ben told the forum. “As Australia's leading telecoms provider, we have to include *everyone* in our planning, our automation testing, our scenario testing – every step of our product journey.”

Chris Riley, a Ways of Working coach, summed it up when he urged colleagues to “keep asking the hard questions, keep thinking outside the box... Tech is a big enabler, but I think the biggest enabler is changing our mindsets and challenging the assumptions we might not even know we have.” Chris has been practising his own preaching, helping Telstra employees develop more cross-boundary skills, work more



flexibly, and adopt more agile ways of working – a process that helped him ‘declutter’ his own life after a serious motorcycling accident six years ago.

This theme of including everyone is at the heart of Telstra's purpose to build a connected future where everyone can thrive. It also underpins Telstra's accessibility training, where Amir Ansari is trying to break through conventional approaches to disability and create an environment where employees naturally consider a whole range of challenges that may impact on individual customers.

“We need to rethink the conventional approach to accessibility as being a benefit or an ‘add-on’ for our customers,” says Amir. “Disability can also be temporary – like an ear infection or laryngitis – or situational – like a new parent, or someone with a heavy accent.

“The key is to empathise with people's individual situations and put ourselves in their shoes, to begin to realise just how much we can do to make their lives easier.”

Opening our doors to offer opportunities for everyone

Once in a while, an initiative comes along that creates a sea-change in people's attitudes, that not only changes the goalposts but brings the touchline closer as well.

Such has been the case with the Australian Network on Disability's Disability Confident Recruiter (DCR) program, which over the past two years has delivered a series of changes across Telstra – and a transformation in our employees' thoughts towards disability.

“Our DCR submission set out to tackle barriers to recruitment, but wound up achieving so much more,” says Telstra's Diversity & Inclusion Lead, Kylie Fuller. “There was a real sense of collaboration, including many people who'd never been involved in disability before. People across our recruitment, HR, ICT and property departments all reviewed their policies and processes – and even created new ones – to put accessibility and inclusion front and centre of the business.”

While the DCR program is principally focused on recruitment and barriers to employment, the extensive groundwork required to achieve DCR status meant that Telstra had to evaluate and overhaul processes across our world of work: from building access and adaptations, to flexible and remote working, inclusive training, accessible documents and apps, personal safety plans – every element of life at Telstra.

In early December, the hard work was rewarded when Telstra became only the 13th organisation in Australia to be recognised by AND as a [Disability Confident Recruiter](#).

Support from the start

The DCR process forced Telstra to take a long, hard look at accessibility in all its forms – from the moment a new graduate or potential recruit has the company in their sights.

This meant everything from more accessible advertising to simpler recruitment processes, interview modes tailored to candidates' needs,

streamlining applications for workplace adjustments, and, of course, the promise of personal support to help employees work at their best. Our long-standing commitment to making 'all roles flex' is also critical – and flexibility is often the only adjustment required.

Diversity & Inclusion are now working collaboratively with Telstra's Health Management & Rehabilitation team, which has been expanded to include eight allied health professionals – including three physiotherapists and three occupational therapists who are dedicated to making work safe and comfortable for individuals' needs – be they physical, cognitive, or related to an injury or chronic illness.

“Hiring managers feel more confident to make an offer to a person with accessibility requirements when they know that the right help and support will be available,” says Kylie Fuller. “Any employee can approach the team to request an adjustment to their workplace – a change that benefits long-term employees as much as new starters.”

Empowering our graduates

The DCR initiative also generated positive impacts for Telstra's renowned graduate program, which aims that people with disability make up at least 10% of its annual cohort.

Kelly Hatton, a graduate lead in Telstra's Early Careers program, says the program tries to make it as easy as possible for applicants to talk about accessibility – with the promise of providing every support available to make their work safe and comfortable.

That support includes everything from detailed manager briefings to office adjustments, to personal safety and evacuation plans. “Building evacuations can be a challenge for many people,” says Kelly. “For someone with anxiety, we may want to buddy them up with a colleague. If someone has an issue using the lifts, we may need to prepare their manager.”

With 180 graduates starting in February 2020, the team is hard at work making sure all new personnel are secure, comfortable and, above all, happy at work. “Everyone who’s identified as having disability has a personal plan in place,” says Kelly. “A couple of people have requested workplace adjustments, a couple need special software. It’s not just about adjustments though, it’s all elements of their safety and wellbeing while they’re at Telstra.

“At Telstra, we have all the support systems, the tech, and an amazing culture that welcomes people from all walks of life,” adds Kelly. “If we can’t give them an opportunity, who can? I’m incredibly proud to be working for a company that will genuinely give anyone a chance if they want to work for us.”

“We want people to feel welcome and to feel that sense of belonging that’s so important when you start a new job. By stating our commitment to flexibility and accessibility and becoming aware of people’s needs, we can set them up for success from the beginning.”

Kylie Fuller



AND’s Member Experience Team Leader, Emily Sparling (left), presents Telstra’s Disability Confident Recruiter certificate to our Diversity & Inclusion Lead, Kylie Fuller, and Program Consultant Carolyn McDonnell.

Optimising your workplace

As part of the DCR process, Telstra has also overhauled its workplace adjustment system, with a simple application form available through Workday, our human resources management system, which enables any employee to apply for a reasonable adjustment to help them do their work more effectively. The recruitment team has specific accountability to answer questions from employees, new recruits and managers about adjustments.

“We were implementing Workday while in the middle of our DCR application, which really helped us review and test the new system against the relevant criteria to ensure that we could meet all our accessibility requirements,” explains Carolyn McDonnell, the consultant who oversaw the DCR submission.

Workplace adjustments are now tracked through Donesafe, an injury management system that’s been adapted to monitor the progress of these applications. “Whatever your need, be it a standing desk or regular work breaks, a piece of medical equipment or some specialised software, our message to all employees is that we are here to support you,” says Carolyn.

Metrics

- Australian employers who have completed the requirements of the Disability Confident Recruiter program: 13
- Telstra employees who have requested a workplace adjustment in the first month of the DCR program: 20
- Employees in our Talent Acquisition team who have completed the DCR online training: 40 [with a further 180 due to be trained]
- In future, all new recruitment employees will automatically be enrolled in the DCR training program.

A place to ask any question about digital accessibility

Do you have a burning question about how to make your next app more accessible? Need advice about colour contrasts, sound and captions, or labels that help screen readers explain a specific feature? Or is there a bug in your system that's preventing you from adapting an app for part of your audience?

These are the kinds of questions that confront Telstra's product managers, developers and designers every day. Although there are online forums that provide general tips and advice, Telstra employees have not had a dedicated forum to source expertise that relates to our own operating environment – until now.

Over the past six months, a group of committed Telstra Digital staff have set up a formal Accessibility Guild – the 'A11y Guild' – to share advice about the latest accessible design tools, and to help our products interact with adaptive and assistive technologies.

Bringing people together

With the arrival in October of Sean Murphy as Telstra's first dedicated Digital Accessibility Manager, the Guild now has a vocal champion who lives with the challenges of vision impairment.

As anyone who attended last year's [IDPWD event](#) will attest, Sean is a compelling and personable speaker who just happens to be one of Australia's leading accessible tech experts. His guidance at the A11y Guild is already proving invaluable – and encouraging more staff to join our monthly meetings.

"The Guild is for people who are looking for support with a challenge – say if they've found a web page that's not accessible, or part of an app that can't be read by a screen reader," says Sean. "It aims to help them find answers to specific challenges, and to learn best practice going forwards."

In addition to Sean, advice and guidance are provided by senior Digital Systems managers, visual designers, UX developers, and visiting consultants. "We generally invite participants to throw their challenges out to the whole group and encourage people to come up with solutions together. Our goal is to create a network of experts who people can go to for advice on specific issues – and who'll become accessibility champions in the business more generally."

Supportive partners

Following a couple of well-attended presentations by Telstra partners and consultants, Sean and Digital Systems GM Ben Pintos-Oliver are now planning to invite more individuals with specific disabilities to speak to the A11y Guild.

From March, they'll also be hosting regular 'brown bag sessions' – named for their lunch-hour timing – at which developers and designers can share details of projects they're working on or things they've learned in their accessibility work.

"We're basically a 'lessons learned community'," says Sean. "It's all about sharing tips and experiences, asking questions, and solving challenges together."

Meetings of the A11y Guild are simulcast and organised through email invites, with both Australian and international employees with an interest in digital accessibility welcome to participate.