



Accessibility & Inclusion @ Telstra

Pioneering 'live' test program brings people with disability into our product testing room

At Telstra Digital, a program of regular monthly user testing is bringing the challenges that face millions of Australians into the product development journey.

It's been described as the "most real" product testing Telstra has ever done. But for the 20 people living with disability who took part, it was the beginning of something much more significant – a chance to play a personal part in the development of products and services that will help millions of Australians stay in touch with the world.

Telstra Digital launched its hands-on user testing pilot for people with disability from

November 2020 to February 2021, with four rounds of 'live testing' of various aspects of the My Telstra app on a multitude of platforms and devices. Diversity of experiences was key: the pilot involved people who are blind or have low vision, participants with mobility and dexterity challenges, and others with a variety of neurodiverse conditions. There were people who spend little time online, and others who connect every hour, using a variety of assistive technologies. And there were people of all ages, genders, jobs and backgrounds.

For the facilitators, the pilot represented the beginning of a new era incorporating real customer experiences into Telstra's product development journey – a journey that will get fully underway on 26 April, when a new Telstra Digital team rolls out the first regular monthly user testing program for participants with disabilities.



“This testing is significant not only in the context of Telstra, but for corporate Australia as a whole,” says Adem Cifcioglu, co-founder of accessibility consultancy Intopia, who facilitated several of the pilot sessions. “The current Web Content Accessibility Guidelines provide a good starting point, but testing with real users is the only way to know that the things you’re building actually work for people.”

Intopia has supported Telstra’s accessibility work for several years and will continue to recruit participants for the user testing from its renowned Connect database. But from this month, Telstra will be taking over the principal running of the testing itself.

“Consultants can provide all the technical expertise in the world, but that’s no substitute for seeing users actually use your products and provide direct feedback,” says Adem. “The great thing at Telstra is that they have a dedicated team of accessibility specialists driving this work internally – and they really take accessibility seriously.”

A dedicated team

That commitment is manifested in the allocation of a dedicated team to the project, including a user experience (UX) researcher, an accessibility lead and a UXer from Telstra Digital, together with product developers, designers and owners observing the sessions to witness first-hand the challenges and defects identified by participants.

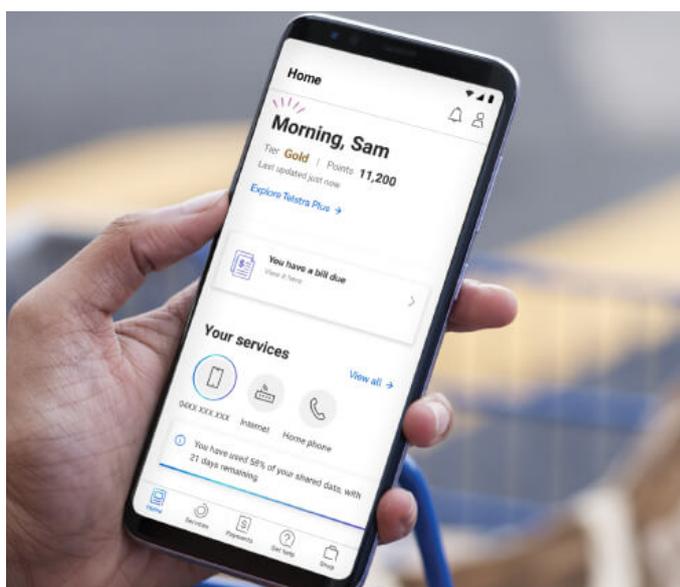
“It’s very exciting new territory getting our developers involved,” says Ben Pintos-Oliver, Telstra’s GM of Digital Systems and Digital Accessibility. “Traditionally user testing is run by designers, but with accessibility most of it’s invisible, sitting under the design in the code. So it’s important for developers also to be involved – and to give them an opportunity to have an ‘aha moment’ when they’re witnessing real reactions to their code from customers.”

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Adem Cifcioglu
Co-founder, Intopia

In relation to My Telstra, those challenges included everything from poor colour contrasts and inadequate touch target sizes, to a ‘Message Us’ icon that couldn’t be read by screen readers and created confusion over whether it would transfer to a live chat or a messaging service.

“These issues all relate to specific WCAG guidelines and are now being actioned urgently,” says Ruth Herr, the UX researcher on the team. “We also picked up several issues that might not be missing a guideline but showed how we could do things better – like a participant with dyslexia explaining how they found lengthy written instructions overwhelming, and a low vision person who asked for a cream or light grey background rather than a bright white that tired out her eyes.”



Real lives, real issues

“This is the most real type of user testing we’ve ever done,” adds Ben Pintos-Oliver. “Unlike ordinary user testing, where the testers are simulating a scenario, checking for usability and value propositions and that customers can find what they want on a page, with this kind of testing the product is ‘live’ – with backend systems talking to each other and real reaction times, allowing us to see the real world and how different things work for people with different abilities. So we wind up getting some really important insights on a much broader range of functions.”

As well as insights into specific features, the pilot provided rich foundational knowledge on how best to run this kind of research in-house, including:

- the tech setups to follow participants’ on-screen journeys through a multitude of platforms and technologies;
- frameworks for developers to pose individual challenges, and for participants to ask specific questions;
- the best ways to document and share findings.

Telstra Digital will run the monthly sessions on specific accessibility targets from now on, baking the program into their user testing schedules – alongside their regular fortnightly testing – for 2022. A cohort of accessibility-focused developers and designers have received early training, and a schedule of priority ‘use cases’ has been drawn up, with the Telstra.com website next in line.

“The irony is that a lot of the third-party tools we use to support our research are not in themselves accessible, so there’s definitely a lot of groundwork to do,” says Ruth Herr. “We have a long list of things to do to get this testing right – but I have no doubt that we’re going to make it work!”

Participant’s view: Sadam Ahmed & My Telstra



Sadam Ahmed is blind and relies extensively on his computer and iPhone to inform and facilitate his daily life. The 29-year-old software consultant runs a business

helping companies test the accessibility of their online products and services. He’s also a Telstra customer – so the My Telstra app is familiar ground to him.

“I use this app regularly and have never really had problems with it,” says Saddam. “If I wanted to upgrade my service or get a new phone, I might go to a Telstra store, but actually I haven’t spoken to a Telstra agent for nearly two years. I just make sure I’m being debited the right amount each month, and that’s easy through My Telstra.”

Sadam did two sessions as part of Telstra Digital’s user testing, using his JAWS screen reader to run various self-assessments on My Telstra. “I had to check how much I owed, get more details on a bill, query a bill, and check how many services I was using,” he says. “Everything worked well, but then I use this service often so I know my way around.

“I have a direct debit which pays my bill every month, I don’t receive any letters – which is great environmentally – and the online store is open 24 hours, so I can get more information whenever I want. I can pay, check a bill, order new products online. I’ve only ever had issues getting in touch when a new iPhone comes out – but I guess that’s the same for everyone!”



Video spotlights experiences of employees with disability

When Niki Petousis and Brady March volunteered to take part in a video about working at Telstra, it not only opened the door for hundreds of long-overdue corridor conversations – but delivered a compelling personal reminder of the importance of colleagues who care.

“Even though Niki and I are both pretty unfazed about discussing our disabilities, we actually had no idea about each other’s circumstances, even after nearly a year of working together,” says Brady.

Brady and Niki – who are both Ways of Working coaches – were among five employees who shared their stories in the [snappy two-minute video](#), launched to mark International Day of People with Disability in December 2020.

The video features a series of candid, often humorous Q&As that pull no punches about the challenges of working with a disability

– challenges that usually have more to do with social preconceptions than tools or adjustments people may need to do their jobs.

Empathy, not sympathy

Tamara Somers, a Senior Sustainability Specialist who lives with multiple autoimmune conditions, says the video has led to more than 20 colleagues approaching her, “saying they had no idea about my condition”.

“I don’t want sympathy,” Tamara stresses, “but a little empathy is always nice – and not being judged as someone who’s somehow deficient.”

Brady, who has profound hearing loss, says he’s found people at Telstra to be “amazingly empathetic... I’ve only had a small handful of negative experiences, which have all been down to people not being aware – speaking quietly or covering their mouths – rather than anything malicious”.

Brady says he’s glad the video has had such a positive impact. “Without this kind of messaging, people will never find out about your needs – and you may not find out about the kind of supports available to you.

“I use a special set of headphones that work with my hearing aids, but I wouldn’t have found out about them if it hadn’t been for a corridor conversation. We need to have more of these conversations to know what support is out there.

“People with disability are often reluctant to ask, particularly in larger companies where there’s more red tape. At Telstra, we’re very lucky that these conversations are now being pushed from the top.”

A new openness

Niki says creating a culture where people are not afraid to speak out is critical. “If you make me feel comfortable to speak about my disability, and don’t make me feel I’m a burden, I’ll tell you anything you want to know,” she says.

“These kinds of productions are so important to inform people that not all disabilities are visible, to let people know it’s OK to ask any questions they may have.”

Niki Petousis

Niki says she was surprised to find out about Brady’s hearing loss – particularly because he speaks so eloquently – and they had never had a disability-related discussion before.

“We’re now adopting this new openness as part of the social contract for our teams, trying to encourage every coach and scrum master to ask about people’s needs when setting up a team or taking on a new member,” says Niki. “It’s all about making people feel safe and comfortable to talk about what they might need in the way of tools or working conditions.

“There are so many different requirements out there, but people generally don’t want to discuss their challenges at work. As a

manager or team leader, you need to be regularly checking in with people. If you make it OK to talk about it, if the warmth and the empathy are there, the facts will always come out.”

Breaking silence and changing norms

“This conversation has begun in earnest now, and nothing can stop it,” says Niki, who also serves as the current co-lead of TelstrAbility, an employee group representing people with disability and their allies.

Tamara says that although Telstra is streaks ahead of most Australian companies in valuing employees of all abilities, breaking down personal misconceptions remains an ongoing challenge.

“There’s such a big community of silently disabled people you may never find out are disabled,” she points out. “We’re not here to tick a box for corporate social responsibility or fill a quota – we’re here because we can do our jobs better than the other people who applied for them.

“Despite that, there’s still a fear of judgment, that people will think you’re somehow less capable or may be complicated to work with. A number of people who were approached to be in this video said ‘no’ because they didn’t want their colleagues to know about their disabilities.”

But that may slowly be changing. According to Brady, the Q&A video has had significant success in kickstarting valuable discussions. “It’s started so many conversations, and helped us all to meet and talk with other people about working with different abilities.

“To speak with another person who faces similar or greater challenges, there’s this instant sense of connection and support. You know that you’ve got an ally who understands your experiences – that your team has just grown by one more person.”

Disability training delivers renewed confidence and a reflection of Telstra values

It's not often that workplace training has an immediate positive impact on one's working life. But that was precisely what happened to Kylie Powell, a long-standing Telstra business administrator, when a man walked off the streets of Perth in early April enquiring whether he could get a job at her office.

"His speech was quite delayed," says Kylie, who'd taken part in the Australian Network on Disability's Disability Confidence Training two weeks earlier, "and because of this course I was confident to ask him how I could help, and then instruct him how to contact our recruitment office."

"I could easily imagine someone in that situation panicking, but that would have been a really inappropriate response. We need to be able to recognise from people's behaviour and body language if they need help, and be able to ask *how* we can help in a friendly, non-judgemental way."

Kylie was among 20 employees from Telstra's Property and Services offices who volunteered to participate in an online Disability Confidence Training program over two days in late March. The training provided a practical introduction to ways of making our offices, reception spaces and events more accessible – and staff more amenable to having conversations they might previously have struggled with.

From training to action

"Because Telstra has so many offices around Australia, it'd be very hard to go and audit all those sites," says AND facilitator Samantha Nuttall. "But by targeting training at specific cohorts, we can encourage people to look at their own workplaces and customer interactions, and consider how they can make both these things more inclusive and positive for everyone."



With just two hours of direct training, Samantha had to deliver very specific presentations and Q&A sessions that enabled participants to ask questions about their own work. She also delivered several resources to help people make their workplaces more inclusive – including checklists for ensuring 'dignified access' throughout buildings, and making venues and events fully accessible.

"It was about encouraging people to be more open about disability, to overcome their fear of saying or doing the wrong thing," explains Samantha. "People were very engaged, asking a lot of questions. I definitely felt there was a shifting mindset from 'this is not something I need to think about until I see someone in a wheelchair' to 'here are 10 things I can do immediately to make our services more accessible'."

The training was a follow-up to AND's Disability Confident Recruiter program, which was rolled out across Telstra's recruitment, HR, ICT and property departments in 2018-19 and resulted in significant changes to make our recruitment, work and workplaces more flexible and accessible.

Deep personal interest

Perhaps not surprisingly, AND's training attracted several people who have a strong personal interest in the rights of people with disability. Kylie Powell has a son with cerebral palsy, while administration officer Halina Post looks after a sister-in-law with Down syndrome.

"I need to know how to deal with customers with different abilities," says Halina. "Having training like this, which makes you reflect on your attitude to disability and how it can be improved, can help you approach customers in a much more empathetic and appropriate way."

Mavourneen Ross, another Perth-based business administrator, agrees that the chance to be better prepared for unexpected customer interactions is a significant opportunity for Telstra staff – and one she's proud to take up.

"I want to be able to manage visitors in the way that *they* want," says Mavourneen.

"In the past I've often wondered if I was doing the right thing, or might have offended someone, or just didn't know the right thing to say. I think there's no harm in asking someone what to do if you don't know.

"In a way, you could say that it's a disability to the organisation having staff without the tools or knowledge to give some people an experience that is equal to everyone else's. If we can make life much easier for people just by installing a sign with larger letters or placing it at a lower level, why on Earth wouldn't we do it?"

Mavourneen reports, with some personal delight, that the AND training has also had an instant impact in her workplace. "My immediate manager is very keen on making workplace adjustments a priority," she says. "It's now an agenda item at our monthly meetings, and lessons will be relayed to all staff on how they can support this initiative going forwards."

Our Telstra Values

**We are
changemakers**



**We are better
together**



We care



**We make it
simple**

