



The 2017 Accessibility Conference:  
**Becoming a Catalyst  
for Inclusion**  
May 30 and 31, 2017 University of Guelph



## Accessibility in the Workplace: A Dual Learning Process

### Transcript from the 2017 Accessibility Conference

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#### SPEAKER:

Welcome to the session. Accessible in the Workplace: A Dual Learning Process. This will be delivered by Amanda Lin. She is a fourth year student in the disability studies program at Ryerson University. After becoming disabled, she experienced the difficulties of an inaccessible life.

She has developed a passion for accessibility through her studies. She works with students.

#### AMANDA LIN:

Thank you for coming today. We will be discussing the different learning processes that can occur when dealing with accessibility in the workplace.

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I want to let you know I will be using the word disabled rather than person with disabilities is a political statement. This is an important political stance for me because I follow the social model of disability as we learned this morning. It says the person is not disabled but it is the environment that we live and that is disabling.

In doing so, I don't mean to offend anybody. I don't feel I can separate myself from disabilities and society continues to create barriers.

It is my hope that all attendees understand the following.

Each party involved in a working relationship will encounter different learning experiences. Second, because each employment situation will be unique, there is no one solution for creating a successful workspace. Third, communication can be a powerful tool for all parties when hiring and working with disabled individuals.

First off, who am I? I am Amanda. I just finished my fourth year of disability studies at Ryerson University. And this past academic year, I am working with students with disabilities. Or those who identify with a disability. Meaning that if you feel you belong in this group, we accept you and we welcome you.

I have a degree in forensic science but decided to shift my focus after becoming disabled.

Two of the terms of use are accessibility and accommodation. I want to clarify what the difference is between those.

Accessibility is a forethought in the planning process. It's beneficial to all members of society. Not only disabled people. For example, dips on the sidewalk are helpful for people with strollers. It can decrease the need for special arrangements.

And accommodation is an afterthought and often needs to be requested on an individual basis. However, when accommodations may be necessary in cases where issues of access and adaptation cannot be standardised thus when accessibility alone is not enough, the addition of accommodation can be beneficial and require to enable access for individuals.

From this point on, we're going to be talking about the working relationship of the employee and their employer. There will be time at the end for questions. I'm open to a lot of them. I

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hope you have plenty.

Who is involved in this working relationship? We have the employee or disabled individual who is working for the hiring organisation. Each time a disabled person takes on employment, they could have concerns. Every employer is different.

Some of the concerns I had when I started seeking employment as a disabled person were around disclosure, accommodation and the impact of my disabilities and my work.

I was aware of the stigma associated with being a disabled worker and the possibility of tokenism. Concerns about disclosure and accommodation occurred even prior to being offered a job.

It was only with the proper coaching and understanding of my own comfort levels have I learned to discuss my disabilities after securing a position. Each time I disclose and ask for accommodation, it looks different. Depending on who is on the receiving end and how comfortable I am about my abilities in the position.

It has taken me a long time and various experiences for me to learn to fight the stigma around being the disabled worker.

I remind myself of the value I can bring to the company. Thus even if I was hired as a token disabled person, through my work I constantly show organisations the benefits of hiring disabled workers.

It's unfortunate that for some organisations, only personal experience can enlighten and change their mindset. For some organisations, they are open to try new things. For others, they have had bad experiences in the past and are not willing to try anything new. We stick to the guidelines or the policy.

You never learn anything new if you don't try anything new. That's what I tell people. When you learn together, next, we have the employer or hiring organisation who will supervise our employee. Some of the concerns of the employers can have the cost of accommodation and adaptation will cause disruption to the workplace.

The organisation may be focused on using accommodations to create an acceptable workplace.

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This is probably because the accessibility for...

It often sets the bar lower than it could be. That's a personal opinion of mine. Just letting you know that.

Additionally some companies are more focused on complying with the employment Equity act. Although this is beneficial, some organisations fail to go beyond what is necessary. Thus creating a working environment that is lacking in accessibility and inclusion. They hired the person and they got that checkmark off the EA list and that's good enough for them. They don't create the process of accessibility and inclusion in the workplace.

For some people, that's good enough and I'm here to tell you that I am trying to work for more than good enough. That's what many of us here are trying to work for.

One of the best things an employer can be is flexible. In their attitude and approach to increasing accessibility. This will enable the most growth and understanding of how to work with disabled employees. So far we have talked about the employee or disabled worker and the hiring organisation or employer.

On their own, they have their own learning processes going on that they are experiencing. Together, although each party is involved, they are going through their own learning processes, they must come together and work together to learn from each other to gain the most out of their working relationship.

In addition to the learning experiences for parties, another learning process occurs between the employee and the employer.

For this process to be a success, a bidirectional relationship must exist between the two parties. It goes both ways. If you don't know something, I don't know something.

The employee or employer. Communicate, the learning process and working relationship can break down. Especially if an employee is able to feel any difficulties they are having on the job.

For example people with nonvisible disabilities like chronic illness and fatigue. I suggest making time for a one-on-one check in session in order to familiarise yourself with one another and increase the potential for communication.

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Even if it is just hello how are you. Things are going well? That's great. As long as both know there is a set time every week for your concerns. Whether there are none or not. Because they have spoken to you every week for so long, they know they can come to you outside that realm.

You have created that space right away so it is there for them. That's for both parties.

These one-on-one's in particular helped me and my supervisor because it took me some time to open up. I was very fearful about requesting accommodations. Having to inform my supervisors when I was having a rough day. That's what I call my bad days. Everyone is different.

What helped was that when I could come into work and be I am able to work. I might not be smiling today but I am able to work. I will do a good job. Things might take me a few minutes longer but if you're willing to work with me, I am willing to work with you and for you.

Additionally, because society tells us to be efficient workers, many employees do not want to disappoint their employers. I think it's important for society to make space and identify alternative ways of efficiency.

It's time for us to open up and look into what the term efficient means and why we need to be so efficient all the time.

Because there is one definition of efficiency, doesn't mean it's the only one.

Going back to the one-on-one sessions, from that, I figured out and through my other work experiences, communication is key in any relationship.

Working with disabled individuals, I have found communication integral to the working dynamic. I talk to my supervisor about how to work with me. It includes the best method of communication and instruction for example whether verbal, written, email, in person or using lists and diagrams. We discuss the best ways of feedback and the importance of asking if it's OK to ask.

That might seem silly or confusing but as I go on, hopefully it becomes clear. When asking sensitive questions, it's important not to make assumptions. Instead of diving into the question,

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I ask if it's OK to ask about such and such a topic before I even get to the question.

It is a question in itself and I understand that. Although it may seem silly, people appreciate the opportunity to decline talking about sensitive topics. If you give that to them right away, it no longer seems silly because they know you said something simple and small but it changes the whole vibe.

Asking to ask also works with more than just disability -related questions. It can work in racism, sexism, heteronormativity, gender, religion and sexuality.

I developed this method ask to ask last year but I'm sure people have already been doing it because as we become more diverse, it's important to understand that because we are diverse, it doesn't mean you have the right to pry.

It allowed me and my supervisor to open up to me about her lack of knowledge. Understanding each other's lack of experience in the area enabled us to work with one another as well as together.

I am presenting this material and I know I am a person who when I need something, I will come forward. The biggest thing is some people are not like that. You have to be prepared to be moving towards making that space for them. And with them.

That's what helps in this area. For anything. It's making space.

We're going to look into some outcomes for disabled employees and hiring organisations.

With increased accessibility and inclusion practices, it increases levels of engagement and retention of disabled working employees. Tim Horton's Mark Wafer encourages the employment of disabled individuals because he has seen higher retention and attendance rates at these workers.

Hiring organisations will have a larger pool of individuals from which to fill their vacant positions with. It also creates a diverse pool to work from.

For those organisations and businesses who fail to increase their accessibility, it could lead to the continued underemployment and unemployment are many disabled people who are eager

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to work.

They could be left with vacant positions if they do not open to disabled candidates. More and more people with disabilities are accessing higher education and becoming qualified. There is no excuse any more to say they are not qualified. We are equally as qualified as the next person. It's about giving us that shot because many people and places won't hire us without experience. How am I supposed to get that if everywhere I turn to isn't willing to look at me as a whole person and not just my disability?

If they don't do that, they will be left behind because of accessibility and inclusion.

In closing, I'm leaving a lot of time for questions because I think... I don't mind you picking up about questions about my experiences because I think that will be where you gain the most knowledge from my presentation. From learning from my personal experiences.

I am not an expert on the topic. I have lived experience however and try to openly talk about it with others so they feel welcome to do the same.

What you've heard today may not be new information but it is rarely discussed. Openly talking about how to create successful inclusive workspaces combat the stigma of hiring disabled workers and dispels the myths and misconceptions society has had process.

My story is not the only one. I cannot speak for all disabled individuals. By providing a glimpse into my experiences, I hope I can enlighten others on the realities of being disabled and willing to work.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer questions.  
(APPLAUSE)

If you have a question or comment, can you wait for the microphone so the caption is can be on the same ball as us.

SPEAKER:

That was a great presentation. I like how you integrated your personal experience and stories with your clear thinking on this.

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I love how you articulated the ask to ask policy and the carb effect it has. With addressing other barriers that people have based on aspects of their identity like racism, heteronormativity.

I love that effect that it was called out in a more of a social inclusion context.

AMANDA LIN:

One of my biggest philosophies is you don't want your movement to have success on the back of other people. If we all succeed, then we succeed together. It's better that we all succeed rather than one or two of us. That's what is going on a lot of the time. The 99% of people. Money, that whole thing.

I'm not going to get into that because people get angry.

Definitely, when we work together, I'm not going to ask that it is the same because we face different oppressions and experiences. We can understand that all the different groups we come from, we experience those oppressions and understand that we come from multiple identities that will intersect and we look at intersectionality because that is the next step.

Not just the part that is disabled.

SPEAKER:

I have a comment/question which might be outside of this. I wonder if you have thought about it as a disabled person. I have been struggling with the idea of being perceived as less qualified than my peers for certain things because I have an undergrad but have been involved in Masters level work and have been in school for a long time.

I'm wondering about the thought process around not trying to convince employers but trying to get the attention of employers when you seem to be less qualified than your peers but you are really just as qualified if not more. Because of your disability, you may have had an issue and getting the same credentials who are in your peer group.

AMANDA LIN:

I thought about that. We as members of society are taught about the traditional ways of getting to things and achievements and success. Many people with disabilities face oppression have achieved success, they do it in a different way.

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We need to understand that different isn't bad. It means there is a wide spectrum of people of all abilities and diversities. That's what makes the world go round and makes it so full.

If we were all in a room with people who were exactly like us, it might be a little overwhelming. That's the thing. In order to work on accessibility in the workplace, we have to start with policies. We have to start with attitude shifts.

That also goes to increasing awareness. There is a whole spectrum of things that you can work on that will help that. I tried to go through it by increasing awareness. Creating open dialogue and understanding that giving people the benefit of the doubt, it is fear rather than ignorance.

There's a difference between willing to learn and unwilling to learn and afraid of learning.

When it comes to being less experienced than our able-bodied counterparts, one of the biggest things is understanding that policies only go so far. Those policies are there for us and at the same time, they can hinder us in some ways. Some of the policies are framed for certain types of disabilities.

I mean people with physical disabilities might be taken more seriously versus people with nonvisible disabilities depending on what the position is.

It should really be about who is coming through my door as a whole person. That's why think intersectionality is going to play into the big move of accessibility. There is so much to us and even those who are parents who might not have had the traditional education, or are going back to school, the value of being a parent, you learn so much just through going through different things.

There is value in everything that we do. We need to open people's minds to being there with us on that.

**SPEAKER:**

Thank you for your personal story. You touched on my question. I have two children with special needs. One very visible and one not. In the school environment, it has been a lot easier to get help for my daughter with the visible challenges. Getting stuff for my son takes a lot more work.

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You talked about visible and invisible. What difference do you see in the workplace about supports and responses for visible versus nonvisible disabilities?

AMANDA LIN:

Because I have nonvisible disabilities but I have physical and mental health, and experienced both. My friend (with a visible disability) requests something, it's not as suspicious as when someone with a nonvisible disability request something. It shouldn't be that way.

The onus should not be on the individual or disabled individual to keep providing and proving something.

In a court of law, proof was when you are innocent until proven guilty. Why is it not that mindset when it comes to your disability. I know there are those who may be take advantage of that but at the same time, because a few people make it into a bad situation, it doesn't mean you can punish the rest.

When it comes to finding for myself, I had to bring it up first. My employer didn't realise I had a disability. The only reason they knew was because I was in the mentoring program for students with disabilities.

They won't ask me if I need any accommodations. I have to be the one to go to them.

I have said to people who want to increase that in the workplace is don't wait and don't ask and don't assume. Just offer when you hire someone new. Is there anything you need whether it be feedback given orally or written.

You should offer it to everybody. Whoever wants to take it can take it. Whoever doesn't, doesn't have to. It makes it more accessible.

Disability is a double-edged sword when you have a nonvisible versus visible. It can be a benefit because you can get better access. At other times, it decreases your access to services. These policies need to start being enforced and an attitude change needs to occur from higher up within the government.

Because you have a policy and you're not enforcing it, it doesn't show your support. It doesn't show you're behind us. It's lacking somewhere.

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I know I am very engaged and in tune with what I need but I know there are those who might not be because this might be their whole time first experience.

What I have learned a lot of its accessing services for free that go for able-bodied folk. I will adapt it for myself.

If a career centre offers me help, I will go to the session, take what I can get as much as I can get of it and then adapt it for myself.

That leaves the onus on the individual. Then, I take it a step further. I went to the session and learned this. This is how we can apply it to for and with creating accessibility and inclusion.

SPEAKER:

Hello. I work in web development at the University. One of the practices that my department has started practising is that we have the one-on-one meeting that you talked about. What I am hearing today with the different sessions that I'm going to is that it benefits employees that might have a particular disability but it benefits the other employees.

I'm finding that more and more, we endorse standards like AODA and it does benefit everyone. I being more inclusive in the workplace, it's good for employers to realise it's good for everyone. Building communication, nurturing relationships.

AMANDA LIN:

Even if you want to take the next step because that is where we went with my work. We had one-on-one sessions then we would have team meetings with the rest of the team because it's great to change one person's mindset but if you have the opportunity to change for, those will go off and... Like a tree, it will keep growing.

Not everybody is open to it but that is why you have the one-on-one where you have in your session as a supervisor, you can talk about such and such a topic with these people because you brought it up previously, would you be comfortable with that.

You take what you want from it. You talk about it at the 101 then you take it to the group.

Is beneficial for everybody. Not just one person.

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SPEAKER:

I liked the way you integrated your personal experiences and your knowledge and to the presentation as opposed to facts and information.

I agree that if you are fortunate or unfortunate to be the person who is known, your peers and those who come after you remember that you blazed a trail and that can be a good thing and not too good.

You always feel like you need to continue to do that and that creates its own pressures.

You spoke at the beginning about disability, where were you in your work transition in that process of becoming, having a disability and what happens if a person is hired without a disability and then for whatever reason, acquires one? Is there a different process in place and how does the team adjust to things that?

AMANDA LIN:

Some people have accidents. That's easy to work with because a lot of the time, students who did not have a disability, don't know where to go once they acquire it. They go to friends who are disabled and ask what to do.

That's when I get to share my knowledge. I share it prior so they know when they did it.

We are all just waiting for disability to occur in our lives. It's not about yes or no. It's about when.

I like to inform my able-bodied friends as well as my non-able-bodied friends. It's pretty easy to grow as a group if you can continue the communication. That's the biggest thing. When my group had questions, if they had questions about me or another co-worker of mine, I would say, she is open to it. You can ask them. You can talk to the supervisor first about how you think you want to ask those questions before coming to me.

I had a small workgroup so we were all friends. That was easy. I tried to create an open space for dialogue to happen. That works the best way.

When I became disabled, it was when I was in the middle of my 1st degree. I was on my way to

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a career that I thought was going to be the rest of my life. Things changed because... I had to mourn a bit. I mourned something that I thought I had. That happens to a lot of people who acquire disabilities. Even temporary ones.

They don't understand why they are sad. It's a mourning process. You have to go through it. You don't like to take over your life. They are alternative ways to doing things now.

SPEAKER:

I have a question about how we can facilitate or support employers in participating bidirectional process that you were talking about.

It's a great process that you've outlined. One of the things that I have observed and read about is that characteristics that tend to be more promoted in leadership positions and especially business context and those characteristics are often counter to being vulnerable and asking for help and being that partner in learning position.

Especially in the employer/employee, hiring employer to employee position. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that dynamic and how to support that.

AMANDA LIN:

My biggest thing is that I had to get over the fact that my employer was my boss. That sounds weird but I was fearful. They are higher up than me. They know more than me. My boss told me she had never worked with someone with disabilities. I knew she wasn't the expert. I was the expert. In my life, I will always be the expert because it is mine.

People don't understand that because we are told that doctors are the experts, teachers, so-and-so is the expert. In your own life, you will be the expert. You will know what you need and when you don't know, you have an open conversation with those who are your support system. That can include your boss.

If they make themselves vulnerable, it allows for you to be vulnerable. Someone in there has to be taking the first step.

I encourage the employer to be the one to show vulnerability right away. That's what I mean by making space. When you show you have made space or created an opportunity, it takes the onus of the individual especially the disabled or vulnerable individual and that is the key.

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SPEAKER:

I have a question about recruiting. I'm not sure if that's within the realm of the subject.

I'm from the US. I'm curious about how I could influence my employer if there is the right language to use in my job postings and recruiting and questions to ask because of protection laws. You can't ask directly, do you have a disability. You wouldn't but is there a way, are there ways to express inclusive attitudes towards disability and at least the ability to adjust and change and figure out how best to accommodate?

AMANDA LIN:

There definitely is. I started on it with the question I wanted to ask. On a piece of paper, not to anyone else. Then I knew it was inappropriate. I worked backwards and broadened it. I thought ... Instead of asking if you have a disability, you can say if anyone has any needs of any kind, feel free to reach out or come talk to me personally.

Professors do that, see me after class but the whole class is sitting there.

You can do it privately but on the posters and emails. You just say "if you have any concerns, questions, comments, needs" that encompasses it.

If you are serving food, I try not to use the word accommodation because I am thinking about you as an afterthought. That is a personal preference. I know that sometimes, you need to start with the systems in place. If it works from accommodation models, start with it. Keep pushing it towards accessibility.

Little changes on your signs. That's how you do it. When you recruit people, that's how you would do it.

When it comes to certain words, it depends on your philosophy or model your company goes with.

You can ask if they prefer persons with disabilities. That is the medical model approach. That is the respectful way of saying it. I use disabled because it is a political choice for me.

Depending on the company, you can get away with some of your own personal things.

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Meet each other where you are at. Any other comments?

SPEAKER:

Thank you Amanda. Thank you everyone for attending. Thank you for the questions. That was a great discussion.

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