

[music playing]

[Narelle] Good morning.

Welcome to today's episode  
of The Digital Access Show,

where we talk about  
communication,

disability,

and accessibility  
in the digital world.

Today's guest is a  
guest with a difference.

She has some very  
interesting experiences,

and I am not sure whether  
she has a disability or not,

but that's not the point.

The point is the  
experience that this lady has...

is something I would  
love businesses to hear,

and understand  
and take on board.

Everyone, please  
meet Tracy Whitelaw.

Thanks, Tracy,

[Tracy] Hi Narelle.

Hi everyone. Thank you for  
having me. Happy to be here.

[Narelle] I'm excited

to talk to you,

because you're in  
an industry that I love,

which is the information  
technology industry.

Tracy, tell us a bit  
more about yourself,

other than the fact that you're  
in an industry that I love.

[Tracy] Course.

So, my current role,

I'm the Chief Digital  
Officer at the LGAQ,

which is the Local Government  
Association of Queensland.

So, we are the peak body for all  
local government in Queensland.

Been around for about 129 years,

so not going anywhere.

And look, my role at  
a very high level,

I have a digital  
department that I manage,

and our focus is really  
on uplifting digital literacy,

data maturity,

digital innovation for our  
councils throughout Queensland,

and internally, of

course, at LGAQ.

So that's my day job, I guess.

I also have a startup business,

where we build immersive  
virtual reality experiences.

So, that's my after work work.

But look, I'm a  
long time "digi-nerd."

Been working in digital  
for over 25 years now,

and just absolutely love the  
opportunities that it brings,

and, I guess, the  
variety that it brings to me,

you know, as part of my career.

[Narelle] Yeah. What  
is the other barriers...

in the digital platform  
that you build,

or that you're managing now?

What are barriers for people?

People with disability,  
people that are elderly,

people that are just learning,  
people with other languages.

What are the barriers?

[Tracy] It's a great question,

and I might wander a

little bit in my response.

I think...

I first became aware  
of digital accessibility

and the challenges  
of that for people...

probably back, I'd say, when I  
worked at Brisbane City Council.

So, I worked at Brisbane  
City Council from 2010 to 2015,

and we as a team, back then,

we were pushing quite a  
lot of boundaries around...

how to engage with communities  
through digital channels,

how to think about,  
you know, not just us,

in how we interact  
with digital as well.

And at that time, I would say,

that was my  
earliest introduction,

really, to the standards  
for accessibility in digital.

We really tried, back then  
it was probably WCAG 2.0,

I think maybe back then.

We aimed to have that  
site at that AA level.



But we also had a really  
big focus on other languages.

So, we had a sort  
of culturally linguistic,

diverse approach to  
how we share digital,

We often put things out in  
different languages and so on.

So, that was probably  
my first introduction.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Tracy] Then I went to work  
at the Commonwealth Games,

and I know, Narelle,  
you and I spoke about this.

So, I headed up digital

for Commonwealth Games between  
2015 and 2018 on the Gold Coast,

and that was where I really had  
to increase my own knowledge.

I think I was probably more  
ignorant than I should've been,

if I'm being honest.

-[Narelle] Yep.

-[Tracy] And...

[Tracy] It sort of came  
to my attention, actually,

in looking through what had  
happened at the Sydney Olympics,

and how there

was a real push back,

in terms of the

accessibility of that website

and their digital platforms.

And I remember...

really spending a lot

of time educating myself

and then subsequently having to

educate a lot of senior people

at the Games around

why it was important.

And I think the challenge,

and again,

I'm always very candid,

the challenge was not so much,  
why do we have to do this?

But... it wasn't  
prioritised, I don't think,

and I think everyone,

of course, felt value and  
understood there's value in it,

but it wasn't prioritised  
because of money,

because of timing,  
because of resources.

So, I had to fight  
really hard at that time

to make people aware  
of why it was important.

And so for me,

the challenge around

it, and even now,

like at LGAQ,

we manage, you know,

over 100 websites for

councils in Queensland.

So, accessibility is just

a core delivery for us.

We should not be delivering

something that's not accessible.

So for me,

it's been an evolution.

It's been kind of being involved

but not quite understanding,

focusing myself to understand

the challenges better,

and then educate other people.

And now just absolutely

being in the position of...

there is no other option.

This is the standard.

This is what we should be doing.

And if we're not doing this,

we are doing a disservice to a

huge section of the community

that we don't understand,

and that's not okay.

So for me, the challenge is no longer getting people to do it.

It's just making sure that what we are doing is right,

and that it meets the standard.

So, it's probably become more of a technical challenge,

rather than sort of a philosophy of whether it's right or wrong,

or needed, or,

you know, anything like that.

[Narelle] Okay.

So, on the technical side,

and even within your staff,

how much do you  
think the developers,

the designers,

how much knowledge do  
you think they get at uni,

at Tafe, wherever  
they learn their trades,

get about WCAG?

[Tracy] Look, I would say it's  
limited, if I'm being honest.

Certainly in terms of...

So, I'm really lucky.

The team that I have  
now are very aware of this.



Like, I think I told you

a couple years ago,

they worked very closely

with Logan City Council,

to develop their website,

so super aware of it.

Absolutely know that it's core.

In terms of where

did they learn it?

They learned it on the job.

A hundred percent.

They didn't learn it by

being taught it at uni.

They didn't learn it through

some other academic means.

It really was something  
that was forced,

in a positive way, onto them  
to learn and to understand,

so they've honed their skills  
through a process of doing,

and delivering.

But I would say there's  
still a huge gap in terms of...

teaching why it's important,

and teaching developers,  
or others in digital honestly,

to look for opportunities  
to be better.

That's a big gap.

[Narelle] What are  
technical challenges

that you're going  
to experience in...

bringing the accessibility  
into all of your work?

[Tracy] Something you said to  
me actually, in our last convo,

has stuck with me, so  
I might share it if that's okay.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Tracy] I remember at the Games,

you know, we didn't have  
anyone working in the team,

that I'm aware of,

that had any  
specific disabilities

in terms of how  
they access digital.

So we would try and...

fake that as much as possible  
using the JAWS machines,

and all of the other pieces  
of tech that we could.

You said something to  
me a couple weeks ago,

which was that's really good,

but it will never give you

the same experience, right?

And I think that's really  
important to keep remembering.

To answer your question around  
what technical challenges,

I think for me, that's a  
technical challenge in itself,

is that the tools never provide  
you with full insight, right?

You can never be in  
that lived experience,

and tools that are there  
to help you understand it,

yep, they do work to an extent,

but I don't think they can

give you that lived experience.

And so technically,  
you're relying on guidelines or,

you know, policies around  
how to implement things,

and I find that dependent  
on who you speak to,

these can be interpreted  
very differently.

So that's a real  
technical challenge for us.

When we see something  
and we say, oh,

this doesn't look like it  
matches the standard,

someone else might  
say, you know what?

There's a little bit of  
movement in that. It's fine.

So it's almost like that  
becomes a technical issue.

Do we implement it? Don't we?

Are we doing the  
right thing or not?

So I hope that  
answers your question.

[Narelle] It does.

I think one of the things  
I'm really passionate about,

is ensuring it just becomes

standard operating procedure.

As a developer,

even a person that's writing  
a document, or doesn't matter,

excuse me, it doesn't  
matter what it is.

If it's standard  
operating procedure,

like using Control C for  
copy, which everyone does,

that is going to surely  
make life easier for everyone.

Because one of the  
things I often hear is,

oh, you have a website



for this group of people.

You might have a website for them, and I say no. One website.

Because that brings costs down.

But how do you get it to be a standard operating procedure?

[Tracy] Yep. Look, well, I mean,

the legality of it should drive a lot of that, right?

Like you would think.

And that was one of the things from the Olympics that I recall,

was that I think they did get taken to court.

[Narelle] They did.

Bruce McGuire versus The Sydney  
Olympic Games committee. Yes.

[Tracy] So, you would think that  
it was just a no brainer, right?

You'd think legalities around  
it would drive the behaviour.

I don't think that it does.

I think there is a huge  
knowledge gap, genuinely,

around...

what the laws are,

but how to interpret them,

and who it's applicable to.

And so,  
obviously, at the moment,

I work heavily in the  
local government space,

and we have a really  
diverse group of members.

Some who are,

you know, maybe their  
council has 60 people in it,

and their community  
has 500 people.

Now, the easy thing  
would be to say,

we don't need to deal  
with this, right, for them.

But as you pointed  
out in our conversations,

you know, you don't  
know where someone is.

You can't tell by looking  
at someone often...

what their particular  
needs might be,

in terms of interacting  
with your website.

So, I think it's an  
education piece.

Also, it is that it's  
just not optional.

It's not optional.

It has to be built  
in to any digital...

experience that you're creating.

And I think...

But I think still,

there is still that gap  
around prioritising that.

It seems to still have not  
become core development.

And that's really disappointing,  
because it should be.

[Narelle] Yeah, I  
agree with you there.

I agree with what you say about

people not seeing the need,

because you don't know

what you don't know.

So, education is the key.

What steps do you need to take  
as a project manager or manager

to ensure digital accessibility  
is built into all the work?

[Tracy] Great question, right?

I have a team of 20.

So,

as a CDO,

my mindset is is

always conscious of that.

Do I do a good enough  
job of making sure

that everyone else  
is is conscious of it?

Probably not.

I'm not going to sit  
here and say yes,

because I would be lying.

I think that there are  
blind spots everywhere.

Do I talk about it at  
an executive level often?

We have an executive  
meeting every week.

I'm part of that team.

Do I talk about it  
there? Probably not.

So, I think I would  
be lying to say that,

you know, I'm always  
leading by example.

But what I would say  
is that we as a team,

we have had conversations  
that it is just expected.

It's not a nice to have,  
and it's not a request.

Like it is expected.

And I think that the team I have



now, I've been really lucky.

My team has been pretty  
stable for nearly five years.

We haven't had  
many people leave.

I think we have an  
inbuilt acknowledgement

and appreciation that is part of  
who we are and how we operate.

But I would say that for me,

anyone in a leadership position  
should be banging that drum...

probably more loudly  
than I think we do,

holistically.

And I think that  
until we're asked...

by someone like yourself  
to have this conversation,

or asked to be on a panel,

like you know, I was a few  
weeks ago when we met.

We probably don't  
just talk about it.

We talk about the  
shiny stuff often.

We'll talk about AI  
and we talk about,

oh, we've built this  
and we've done that.

Actually, some of this stuff  
gets lost in those messages.

So I think it's on  
people like myself,

other peers that I  
have to make sure that...

it either is a conversation or  
it's part of the conversation.

[Narelle] Yeah.

I agree with that.

It has to be a top  
down approach,

but I also think it has to  
be a bottom up approach,

that the people...

at the, you know, at the coal  
face, are saying, hey Tracy,

we must add this in.

We have to do it.

And I think it's also  
people with disability,

elderly people putting their  
hands up and saying, hey guys.

We need to access  
this information.

If we can't access it,  
you're not doing your job.

So I think it's not  
just one person.

I think it's got to be a  
community approach.

[Tracy] Yeah, I agree.

I think any good  
digital experiences...

is always a community  
approach, to be honest.

It is top down, bottom up.

You always need a champion.

You know, through  
the whole process,

you need champions willing  
to continue to do what's right

and do what's best.

And I think if you  
don't have that,

it's really hard to  
drive change, overall.

And I think, like,

when I think about...

I think one of the other  
challenges is that...

people don't think about the  
entirety of the diverse group

that needs to access this.

So, the obvious ones is  
someone has, you know,

something wrong  
with their sight.

They can't see the  
website. Okay, yep, great.

They have a hearing problem that  
they perhaps can't hear things.

They're really obvious, but  
there's so much more colour...

around it.

And like you just said,

seniors accessing thing is a  
whole other conversation, right?

So, I think we don't  
talk enough about...

how broad that spectrum is,

and how important

it is to consider that

as widely as we can whilst we're  
going through that process.

[Narelle] Yeah,  
I agree with you.

What...

advice could you give to  
any manager in your position

as a takeaway or anyone  
listening to the podcast?

What's the advice  
you can give, Tracy?

What's the takeaways?

[Tracy] Right. The  
takeaway is educate yourself.



That is the step one.

Step one, like,

go online,

read the basics,

understand the legislation,

understand the standards and the

accessibility, that is step one.

You cannot lead someone if you

don't understand it yourself.

So step one, for me,

is educate yourself.

I would say step two is...

talk to people like yourself...

who understand this  
better than we do.

Right? It is  
absolutely pointless...

sitting here pretending that I  
understand your experience.

I do not,

and I need to talk to  
people who do understand it.

So the second thing  
for me would be,

talk to people who are  
living this experience,

Bring them into  
the conversation.

Don't put them out on the side,

pretending that

you understand it.

Bring them into conversation at

the beginning, not at the end.

Bring them in.

And then I think

the third thing is...

where you can,

try and talk about this,

and try and make people

understand it's not additional.

It's not less of a priority.

It is core.

It is core development.

It's core business.

That's probably my three...

takeaways, I guess, in terms

of what I think I could do,

or people in my

position could do better.

[Narelle] Yeah. Thanks, Tracy,

One of the things I

think people forget,

is really what we're talking

about is good communication.

The website is there to

give some information,

and to collect information.

And if a person can't  
get the information,

well it's not  
meeting its purpose,

and it's the same as  
any digital document,

whether it's an email,  
doesn't matter what it is.

It's there to give or  
collect information.

If it's not accessible  
for everyone,

it's not meeting the need.

-[Tracy] That's right.

-[Narelle] Tracy,

how can people keep  
in contact with you?

Get in contact with you,

find out more if they want to  
keep the conversation going.

[Tracy] Absolutely.

Look, please find me.

LinkedIn is  
probably the easiest.

Just look me up on LinkedIn.

You'll be able to find me.

Obviously, you know, you  
can contact me by email.

I'm happy to share my email.

Can I just pick up on  
one thing you just said?

I know we're kind  
of like closing it out,

but you just said something  
that really struck me,

as something I  
remember previously,

when you spoke about giving  
everyone the same experience.

I remember in the very early  
days at Brisbane City Council,

actually, when a lot of  
services at that point...

were still face to face  
in the contact centre,

or they were on the phone.

And we were trying to bring in...

digital services as a  
strong alternative to that,

because not only is there  
cost savings to be found,

but just flexibility,

and being available for  
people was important.

And we had this thing  
that we always spoke about,

which was, if someone  
comes through the front door...

in a contact centre,



and Brisbane City

Council to be fair,

their customer service areas

and their contact centres

has been excellent, typically.

It might have changed,

I'm not sure, but it was.

If someone walks

through the door...

of a Brisbane City Council

customer service space,

physical space,

and gets good service,

they should expect that good

service to be exactly the same,

whether they pick up a phone,

whether they walk in or

whether they go to the website.

And I think that is the key.

You should not have

a different experience

dependant on how you

enter a conversation,

with a council,

with a business, with whatever.

And therefore, if the website

is their method of choice

or their delivery or

communication of choice,

it has to be as good  
as having a face to face,

and that means  
being able to handle...

any kind of diverse  
person that's coming in,

and being able to service it.

So, I think that's also  
really important as well.

[Narelle] I couldn't  
have said it better. Thank you.

[Tracy] That's all right.

[Narelle] That's exactly what,  
but that's all WCAG is about,

providing service to everyone.

[Tracy] Totally.

[Narelle] Yes.

Thanks again, Tracy  
for being on the show.

Really appreciate it.

And if you like what  
we do, please like,

share, subscribe, add feedback.

We really do love the feedback.

Good, bad,  
even the really ugly. I love it.

Because it's a learning  
opportunity for me.

And I love to learn.

So, we'll see you next week  
on The Digital Access Show.

Have a good week.

[music playing]