The Digital Access Show — Episode S3 E7

Guest: Melanie Robartson (Deafblind Information Australia Group and Senses WA)

Introduction

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Narelle: Good morning, good afternoon, and welcome to The Digital Access Show. My name's Narelle Wright, and yes, I'm the presenter. However, today we're very lucky to have the guest we've got on. Melanie lives over in Western Australia, Perth, so we're already facing a time difference. Melanie does a lot of work for the Deafblind Information Australia Group.

Narelle: Melanie, thank you very much for coming on.

Melanie: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

Communication Methods and the Changing Landscape

Narelle: One of the things I've been loving, in doing this podcast and in losing my sight, is discovering the different methods of communication that exist today. Growing up, you were told there was written and verbal communication, and maybe a bit of body language. Now, there are countless communication methodologies out there.

Melanie: Absolutely — and that applies very much to people who fall under the umbrella of deafblindness as well.

About Melanie's Work and Experience

Narelle: Can you tell me about the work you do and the area of disability you work in?

Melanie: I'm a speech pathologist by training, and about 17 years ago I started working for an organisation, Census WA. They had a deafblind speciality team, and my learning in all things deafblind began — and 17 years later, it's still continuing.

I also worked as a deafblind consultant. Along the way, we worked with Able Australia and Deafblind Australia to develop capacity in the NDIS sector around deafblindness, including building an accessible digital platform.

Understanding Deafblindness and Service Challenges

Narelle: I have a severe vision impairment myself, and blindness is now just part of my life. But deafblindness comes with extra challenges, doesn't it?

Melanie: Absolutely. One major challenge is the lack of understanding of what deafblindness actually is, along with the fragmentation of services.

Digital Communication Tools for Deafblind People

Melanie: Digital communication can include visual and text access, Auslan, screen readers, touch access, magnification tools, and high-contrast modes. Some deafblind individuals are Auslan users, meaning English can be a second language.

Building an Accessible Website

Narelle: You had to develop a completely accessible website. How hard was that?

Melanie: In 2021 we undertook an accessibility audit. Initially we met only about 42% of WCAG AA and AAA criteria. After remediation, we reached approximately 90%.

Audible Feedback and Error Messages

Melanie: Error messages and feedback must be accessible audibly, not just visually. This became part of the remediation requirements for developers.

Challenges During Testing and Development

Melanie: Challenges included differing interpretations of accessibility, third-party software limitations, varying access needs, and distinguishing inaccessibility from learning curves with technology.

Training and Support

Melanie: Education, practice, and hands-on support are critical. Human support often bridges the gap when something is inaccessible.

Advice for Anyone Building a Website

Melanie: Build accessibility in from the start, work with skilled professionals, understand your audience, and use tools to check contrast, reading level, and accessibility compliance.

Closing and Contact Information

Narelle: Melanie, thank you so much for coming on.

Melanie: Visit deafblindinformation.org.au or email info@deafblindinformation.org.au.

Narelle: Thank you, and we'll see you next time on The Digital Access Show.

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