

The Digital Access Show — Aaron Orme

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Introduction and NDIS uncertainty

Narelle: Hey, welcome to this week's episode of The Digital Access Show. It's been an interesting couple of weeks, hasn't it, with the changes that they're talking about with the NDIS and how it's going to affect participants. It's left many participants feeling quite scared, very anxious. And one of the things that really interests me is, what can participants do to help themselves? And I've brought along Aaron Orme from Vision Management and Coordination to talk with us. Now, Aaron is also a person that's an NDIS participant, so both Aaron and I wear both hats. And Aaron, thank you.

Aaron: Thank you, Narelle.

Narelle: Aaron, it definitely has been an interesting fortnight, hasn't it?

Aaron: Oh, it certainly has been. You know, there's been, I think, more questions raised than answered in the way that it's been delivered. You know, they've, they've sort of lobbed the grenade, and everyone's waiting now for the fallout. And, look, I'm getting phone calls from participants thinking that they're getting kicked off the scheme. What's changing with the scheme? And I'm using the same response that I use with anybody else, is, we only know what's happening when it is actually published in writing on the NDIS website. Until that time, people can make assumptions, they can, you know, think about what's going to happen. What's the guarantee? We know things are going to change. But we don't know what that is going to look like. So, until it's actually written down, I think everyone just needs to just try to relax. I know it's easy to say. But, you know, we just got to wait until we actually see it all in writing.

Inaccessible information during NDIS changes

Narelle: I actually think one of the interesting problems that I'm noticing with all of this — and I've got a tiny bit more sight than you, Aaron — is the amount of inaccessible information that's being provided to us about this. And it's everywhere. Businesses putting up, "Oh, this is my take on the legislation." And they'll be PowerPoint slides. Or they'll be PDFs that are images. And that's only making it worse, isn't it?

Aaron: Oh, it is. And one of the ones that I see a lot of is, you know, with social media, like with Facebook or even LinkedIn posts, where it might look pretty to a sighted person to use nice bold, italic letters in your heading. But when you're a person who's relying on a screen reader, and all you hear is bold, italic, C; bold, italic, I; bold, italic, S; bold, italic, D, you don't actually get to hear what it's saying. And straight away, I just go past it. Now, that could have the best information in the world, but I can't access it. And then you'll get others where they will take a screenshot of something they've found somewhere else and put the screenshot on there. And again, it could be a lot of useful information, but it's not getting to us.

Narelle: And the one thing I get really frustrated with, and you and I often talk about this, is because they will talk with it. Sometimes they talk so quickly, you're trying to think about what they're saying, what the implications are. And you know what, you don't want to sit there and listen two or three times. You want to control how the information is given to you.

Aaron: Oh, correct, correct. That is a big one. And, you know, you've got to be able to — because you've got to remember that even when you're watching some of these podcasts on some of the changes and what have you, we still have the computer talking to us as well about the general environment of the computer. So, you're really having to concentrate. And you can miss a lot of information.

Digital accessibility barriers for providers and referrals

Narelle: Yeah. That's it, exactly. But, you know, I think we can even broaden the conversation a bit more. Because as a support coordinator, what are you seeing, Aaron, with regards to digital information? I know as a participant myself, I get really frustrated. And you listen. You're very patient when I do my rants. But the fact that a lot of stuff we do, or we have to access and use, is not accessible. Is that an experience that you have between providers to providers, NDIA and all of that area as well?

Aaron: Oh, every day, every day. So, you know, I have to try to find a service for a client. Again, I'll go to looking into giving them various options because I always like to give the clients voice and control and to give them suggestions on at least three different options. Now, if I come across your website and straight away it's inaccessible, I can't get an idea of what it's about, there's broken links, there's buttons that don't read out what they are. You could be the best provider. You could be the provider that suits that client down to the ground. But I can't make a referral to them based on the fact that I don't know what it is that you do.

Aaron: You can, you know, I'll ring people up. We discuss what it is I'm looking for. Then they'll send me information, and it can be an image, even though I've just explained to them that, you know, the information that I'm going to need has to be accessible. And, you know, there's a lot of the referral forms online. There's a particular platform that a lot of allied health use. So when you do find that provider that you want to refer somebody to, and they agree, yes, look, let's go ahead with them, you're given a link to go to this particular platform and fill in the referral.

Narelle: Yeah.

Aaron: I can't fill it in.

Narelle: Really?

Aaron: It's not accessible. Yeah.

Narelle: Hang on. Can I, let's take a step back. So it's a third-party platform that wants to generate money for one of the allied health clients.

Aaron: Yes. Yeah. So the allied health are paying to use that CRM, and the referral form is inaccessible. So, you know, the first time I ever used it, I thought, okay, well, it's sort of accessible. And I was able to work my way through to where I had to then enter the client's date of birth. And from what I can gather, without being able to see it, it brought the calendar up and the focus didn't go to the calendar. So I wasn't able to do it. So, you know, I ended up having to ring up, which takes my time, takes their time, and unfortunately, being in the business we're in, costs the participant. You know, I've bypassed doing referral forms before because of that reason. And then they'll send you through the information on the scope of their service. It's not accessible.

Accessibility and usability in disability-sector software

Narelle: But the end client is a person with disability, like you or I. And it doesn't matter whether it's a vision impairment, or it could be an intellectual disability, it could be cog, autism. There's so many different ones that have these sensory problems. That's interesting. I myself was trying to find a CRM software that I can use in my own business.

Aaron: Yep. And I have been through all the ones that are out there, and there's not one that is accessible. Now, there's also what they don't understand too is there's accessibility and usability. You know, can it be accessible? Yeah. Is it usable? No. And I've actually rung them up and I've spoken to them. And the responses I get is, "Oh, but you're a person with a disability. Why are you working in the field?"

Narelle: But there's a lot of people with disability working in the disability sector. We are really common.

Aaron: Correct. Plan management is a big one. A lot of plan management platforms, you know, I have to do budget management for clients, and they're not accessible.

Some of them use third-party plug-ins that they say make their site accessible. And I think I'm preaching to the converted here, Narelle.

Narelle: Oh, you are.

Aaron: They don't do anything.

Narelle: No. I always say in regards to them that if you make a pancake, you can make any pancake look really good. But when you're making the pancake, if you put sugar instead of salt, it still looks the same when it's cooked, and it is inedible. It's unusable.

Aaron: And you know, I've had them come to me and say, look, we've got this fantastic one. It's accessible. And, you know, you go, you sign up for their trial offer, and within two minutes, you know it's not. And then when you explain it to them, unfortunately what they're wanting from you is, "Well, how do I make it accessible?" Now, I'm not an expert in that field. I can certainly tell somebody, hey, it's not accessible. But I can't tell them what to do. And that's, you know, that's where you come in. And that's your role. Your role is to do that. And I refer people on.

Unpaid accessibility labour and inaccessible agreements

Narelle: And I've actually had the issue too where I've said, well, it's not accessible, and they asked me, how do you make it accessible? And they get upset because I'll say, well, actually, I'll have to get you to sign the service agreement, dah, dah, dah. And they'll go, why? And it's like, well, you're a person with disability. You're telling me it's not accessible, so you should tell us for free. And my response now is, but do you do your work for free?

Aaron: Yeah. Yeah. And it's funny you should mention about service agreements. It's like, so, you know, there's a lot of forms that we have to sign that we can't fully read. Now, some of them have legal implications to them.

Narelle: Yeah.

Aaron: Would anyone else sign that?

Narelle: Nah, that's it. That's a good point.

Aaron: Who do we get to read it? You know, look, I have support workers. My support workers are fantastic. However, there's some things that they don't need to know about, and it's personal. So, you know, you're having to rely on strangers telling you what it is that you're going to be signing. And we all know — I mean, I used to do it myself because, you know, with my vision impairment, and I had sight at one time — when you're reading something, you skim through it. Well, that's what a lot of people do when they're reading it to you. They skim through. They think they're getting the parts that you need to know. But really, you need to know the whole thing. So, the general lack of accessibility is, I actually feel it's getting worse.

Narelle: Okay. Now that I didn't expect.

Aaron: Yeah. I haven't seen it getting any better. I think people are just thinking that it's something that people won't comment on. They're not taking it into account when they're starting a project. Because as you've told me many times, it costs a lot more to fix something after it's built than it does to do it as you're going along. And this is where a lot of this could be taken care of if the Commission's practice standards for when people are registering and the indicators that they use — some of those indicators indirectly talk about accessibility and saying that the information should be able to be read by all participants. But all participants, you know, people with a vision impairment, people with a cognitive disability, autism, many, many others who require assistance with print that they can't access. And yet, it's not changing. So, it's just about keeping, continually having to spread the word. And it's getting to them.

Choice, control and informed consent

Narelle: It's taking me to my next question then. Sorry, I want to jump in, because now suddenly we're talking about participant experiences. And one of the things about the NDIS is choice, giving people with disability choice and control and independence. That's taking away that, isn't it?

Aaron: It is. Oh, the independence goes. The choice gets narrowed. And the control over being able to choose who to choose as well. So, it does make it a lot smaller. And then it comes down to then, you know, the information is supposed to be given to that client so that they can make an informed decision on what's in front of them. You know, how can somebody know how to complain about an organisation when the complaints policy isn't accessible? Or how can you give positive feedback when it's not accessible?

Narelle: Even more than that, what is the — because you obviously deal with the agreements and contracts and things all the time — what is the legal issue then if a support coordinator is reading out a service agreement to a participant? Isn't that a conflict of interest?

Aaron: Well, yeah. And you would have to do a case note. You would have to, you know, I would follow it up with an email to that client explaining that we had gone through it, attach it. But you're leaving yourself open. You know, I guess I'm lucky that I haven't had anything happen like that. You know, the majority of my clients have enough sight to be able to read it. Or we've been able to get it, after fighting, in an accessible format. But I think it's like we've discussed recently, and this is a little bit away from the NDIS, about someone sent you a bill. And, you know, how do I know that bill's correct to pay it? And yet I'm expected to pay it.

Narelle: Yeah. And I can't find anything that says legally we can say, well, if we can't read it, we can't pay it.

Aaron: Yeah. Correct. And so, you know, we're sort of put in a position where it's sign it or go away. And that takes away that whole choice and control. And there's some fantastic — look, we all know there's some fantastic organisations out there who take this very seriously. You deal with them. Where they say, we want to do it. We want to make it accessible. And, you know, if done the right way, it's not much extra to do it. You know, it's not much harder to make a PDF accessible than it is to make it not accessible.

Invoices, scams and digital payment risks

Narelle: Aaron, then if we take this one step further. When, like with the NDIS, we're hearing a lot about rorting and scams and everything else. Do you think lack of digital accessibility is part of the causes for setting the condition up so that we can be scammed?

Aaron: Oh, definitely. Yeah. How can you authorise an invoice if you can't read the whole thing? And yet if you don't authorise the invoice, you're not going to get the supports. How do you know that what's on there is correct? And, you know, if you're a self-managed participant, you're uploading that invoice, you're saying that it's true and correct. AI has certainly come a long way in assisting. But again, we all know that AI makes mistakes.

Narelle: OCR makes mistakes. Optical character recognition is the full name for it. It's not reliable in a legal sense, no.

Aaron: No, no. No. So it's, again, you know, I just keep thinking that, you know, it's 2026 and we don't seem to have really come that far with making it accessible. You know, there's a lot of changes, as we know, in the NDIS, which means that a lot of these providers and a lot of the CRM providers and the plan managers are all having to make changes to their system to keep up with the changes that the NDIS put in. And yet they're not taking accessibility into account when they're doing that.

Narelle: They take physical accessibility. They don't take digital accessibility. I'll add one more thing on. Now you've got me really thinking: the new digital payments plan that they're talking about bringing in. I think it's a good idea. I've got no problems with it, with a proviso. All the bills that are sent in need to be digitally accessible, because again, how can participants approve something if we can't read it?

Aaron: Correct. That's exactly right. And at the end of the day, it'll be the participant that it comes back on, because you've approved it. And that's the same scenario as why pay a bill when you can't read it.

Responsibility for accessible digital systems

Narelle: Yeah. So whose responsibility is it, Aaron, to ensure that? You know, with the digital payments thing that they're looking at, whose responsibility is it to ensure accessibility, digital accessibility?

Aaron: Well, it would be the designer, would be, in this case, would be the NDIS. They choose to be the one to build that platform for them.

Narelle: And the bills going in, that's a provider such as allied health. That's your support coordinators. And that is everyone, isn't it? It's anyone that produces a bill.

Aaron: Oh, it is. It is. And, you know, we're also restricted too. You know, some of the accounting software that you use, that you produce your invoices, don't produce a readable invoice. You can put the information in. You know, you put the information in right. But depending upon who you're sending that to, can they access it? Can they actually read it? And they should be able to read it in their own right. And again, I come back to the fact that it is part of the practice standards that the information be available to all participants. And if you don't have it, then you need to say, I'm sorry, but I can't take you on as a participant because I can't provide you with that information. But they shouldn't have to do that. And they shouldn't be able to do that, because that's taking away the choice and control. And they could be, again, coming back to, they could be the best provider out there for that particular participant, but they're not going to get to know about them.

Auditing, standards and the Disability Discrimination Act

Narelle: But wouldn't the NDIS auditors also pick that up? That they can't provide accessible access to all participants?

Aaron: Yeah. Well, again, coming back to those practice standards, I think if it was clearer, if it was actually worded, you know, that says that this includes this, this and this, instead of the wording just being, you know, the information is available and accessible. You know, there's someone's definition of that. You know, what do you

define it as and what I define it as could be two different things. So, yeah, they may not have experience themselves. It comes down to the training, I guess, of what's given to the auditors to go out there. So it comes back up to the Commission. The Commission putting out the information that this is what we need you to be looking at. But I don't know if anyone's ever tested it. You know, has anyone ever gone back and tried to find it? And that brings in, you know, to do with the current review that's happening with the Disability Discrimination Act. Hopefully that they make that better and they actually define digital accessibility as part of that Act. And that then gives people some more power to go back to organisations and say, you know what? Here it is in writing. Because there's a lot of implied references to it. But there's not many places that I can think of — and you might be able to think of some — that actually use those exact words: digital accessibility.

Narelle: The only thing that I know of is the Guidelines for Equal Access to Digital Goods and Services. And that's an advisory note. In that, it does say, if you are not implementing the guidelines, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, you are breaching the Disability Discrimination Act. That's all it says. Digital accessibility is classed as indirect discrimination at the present time, which I know you and I have had many talks that it should be direct, because we live in a digital world.

Business risks for NDIS providers

Narelle: Aaron, what advice could you give an NDIS provider right now, considering what we've just talked about? What is the risk to their business? Even take a step back. What's the risk to their business if they don't do it?

Aaron: Well, look, you know, I think they're missing people. They're missing out on clients. You know, as we mentioned, we're coming at it — and I am, likely — from a vision impairment stance. But there's a lot of other disabilities out there that require that alteration or changes to be made for them to be able to access it. And they're people that they're missing out on servicing.

Narelle: What about a legal risk, insurance risk? Is there areas there that need to be considered as well?

Aaron: Look, I'm not a legal expert by any means, but, you know, I mean, I don't know what would happen if it was found that somebody signed an agreement that they weren't able to actually read and something did happen. I don't know what the outcome of that would be. But the other thing too is to be open to having the conversation about it. You know, I've spoken to many, many providers and when I've pointed out to them that it's not accessible, they just shut off. You know, I just want to have that discussion with them to let them know. Look, I'm just letting you know that your website's not accessible. I'm not able to fill this form in. A lot of them don't care.

Narelle: That's actually sad. That's really sad.

Aaron: Well, that then leads on to why you're in the industry. You know, when you get some of these big organisations in plan management, where the clients can't access and read their statements that are sent out to them, and that's the only opportunity to really check up on what's happening. Or you can read it, but in such a format that it doesn't make sense. You know, with tables where by the time you get down to about the fifth row, you've forgotten what the column is. That's a big one. So, yeah, you're having to look at it to make sure that there's nothing untoward has happened with your plan. You know, that there hasn't been something paid that shouldn't have been paid. And you can't do that. But at the end of the day, as the participant, you're the one that's responsible. So, there's certainly a lot that has to be done. And, you know, if people just stopped for a moment and thought about it — what is this information I'm putting out there? Is it accessible? — then it could be a lot easier for a lot of people.

Advice for participants

Narelle: What advice do you give to the participants? For your participants, what do you tell them in regards to this?

Aaron: Move on. Move on to the next provider. Because if it's this hard now, what's it going to be like dealing with them? Again, they could be the best provider in the world for that person. Their service delivery could be going to meet all the best practice. They might have the best support workers or allied health. But if you can't get past that first point of contact with them, then what's it going to be like moving forward with them?

Narelle: Gee, this is interesting. And I was just starting off, well, let's talk about the NDIS and the changes. Because really what we're saying is, if we can read the information, if we can access the information ourselves, we'll be able to use our community support hours in a more proactive, positive way for us to do the things we want to do. And it's going to give us more choice and more control over your life.

Aaron: You can make an informed decision. A decision that everybody should be able to make based on the information that's in front of them, rather than just missing parts. You might do an intake for somewhere and you missed reading a part that says that it's all group activity at one to three, and you don't realise that. And then you've signed up, and then you're stuck with having to pay for a service that you didn't use because it wasn't the right service for you. And then you've got to try to cancel it, and it causes, you know, a lot of grief on people. And it can make people then just withdraw and not want to even try to include themselves out there, because the barriers can be too high.

Narelle: And it also breaks the trust. It also breaks the trust with their providers, doesn't it?

Aaron: Oh, it does. It does. It certainly does. And once that's broken, it takes a lot to rebuild it. Anyway, it can just start with that conversation. How can we as a provider get this information to you? What is it that we need to do?

Contact details and closing reflections

Narelle: Aaron, thank you. Aaron, how can people get in contact with you to keep the conversation going?

Aaron: Yeah, sure. Yeah, certainly. So they can either email me. It's Aaron, double-A-R-O-N, at VMAC — so V for Victor, M for Mary, A for Apple, C for Charlie — dot com dot au. They can give me a call on 0400 918 729. They can find me on Facebook or LinkedIn under my name, Aaron Orme. Happy to have a chat. Love connecting with providers out there and trying to provide a service to the clients that they need.

Narelle: Aaron, thank you.

Aaron: That's alright.

Narelle: I know this is a shorter conversation, I must say that. Normally, some of our conversations can go for a couple of hours, and we end up going around in circles because you don't find solutions. But really, as a participant myself, an NDIS participant, definitely, you know, if you can't read the information, if you cannot access the information yourself, you have the right to ask for it in an accessible format. And that's the bottom line, because it gives you choice and control. And it gives us independence.

Aaron: Oh, that's a big thing. That's a big thing. You don't want to have to be relying on people. You know, relying on people for things like we've discussed in the past, like how many times do you go to a doctor's and you're going to fill in a piece of paper with all your medical stuff on it. Now, you know, my support workers are great. There's certain things they don't need to know about me. And really, you're putting it out there. You're having to get somebody to know all that information.

Narelle: We could keep going and finding examples. But we have to finish it off, because that is another big area that we'll have to talk about one day, because it is another big issue. It's a huge one. And it's a problem we experience all the time. Thank you, Aaron from Vision Management and Coordination.

Aaron: That's right. Thank you for having me on.

Narelle: Thanks very much. Thanks for coming on. And if you like what we do, please like, share, subscribe, review, and tell us what you think. And we'll see you next week on The Digital Access Show. See you later.

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