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The Digital Access Show: Bern Jones

Introduction to the episode

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Narelle: Welcome to this episode of The Digital Access Show. So, we've been covering some interesting stuff. A few weeks ago we looked at the Brisbane 2032 Games, and what makes... what's it going to be to make it a good Games for people with disability? We're still running the, well, the Commonwealth Games have finished now in Glasgow. We've had Allan Parker talk about good digital communication, and what it is. Letitia Thompson, from Centre for Accessibility, talking again about social media, and the fact it oftentimes is not accessible. Well, I'm going to go back to the other end of the spectrum, and introduce you to Bernard Jones from Impact Training. And I'm sorry if I've got that wrong, Bernard, because Bernard, he's got some interesting stuff to talk about. Please welcome Bernard Jones.

Bern: Thank you very much, Narelle.

About Impact Corporate Training

Narelle: Bern, I know I keep getting the name of your company wrong. Tell me what you do.

Bern: Impact Corporate Training.

Narelle: That's it, yes.

Bern: So, I started Impact Corporate Training with my wife in Singapore 25 years ago, and we've always focused on sales and customer service training, experiential learning, making training realistic and interesting. And... living in Singapore is very interesting because... virtually every company worth it sold had either a regional or a global headquarters there, and that meant they had plenty of training budget. And... experiential training was pretty new in that region, so we had a great start.

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What experiential learning means

Narelle: Can you explain what experimental, experiential training is for those that aren't aware?

Bern: Yeah, experiential training is where, take, for example, something like presentation skills. If you're teaching someone presentation skills, well, experiential training is, firstly, you want to see, you give them an experience. Let's see what you are like doing a presentation right now. So, there's this experience part of it, show us what you can do. And then there's a reflection... upon that, where a person analyses what they think they did right, and what they did wrong. And then you, as an expert, would give some feedback on that, what you think they did well and what they can improve upon. And then you give them some techniques, which they can then take away and think about, and then they would apply that, and stand up and do another presentation. And what you see with experiential learning... is that people improve very, very quickly. And the whole idea being that they can then take that back to when they're actually doing a presentation, and they've learned... to eliminate the things they were doing that were... distracting or detrimental to how they were perceived, and they do more of their strengths, more of the things that keep people engaged. So, that's experiential learning, compared to, say, classroom...

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Narelle: Yeah. -

Bern: What's it called? Pedagogical training, which is where people would, a teacher would... tell you what you need to do right, what you need to do.

Narelle: Yeah, okay. That makes sense. That actually makes a lot of sense now to me. So, you focus on customer service and sales.

Discovering digital accessibility

Bern: We did, for many years. And then... And then I moved back to Australia 14 years ago, and... a relative of mine was telling me all about his role, he's a subject matter expert in digital accessibility. And he was telling me that... this should be an area that we could start to look at... as a training field. Because he knew that what we did was... we would always bring in subject matter experts, and we would

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provide the training design methodology around it, the experiential training methodology. So, whatever your topic is, we would be able to run a training course on that, provided that we were able to... obtain the appropriate subject matter expertise. And so he, being an expert in this field, we sat down and we talked about, well, what would an interesting... digital accessibility training course look like? Why? What actually is it? What does it mean? What's the problem that you're trying to fix? And as I... come to learn more about it, I'm shocked.

Narelle: It's the first time you ran into digital accessibility.

Bern: I'd seen it on my computer. I'd seen the accessibility button on my computer, but I had no idea what it was. And I'd seen, accidentally hit the accessibility button on a remote control on my TV, and it just started talking to me. [Narelle

[Laughs]

Bern: I thought, that's really annoying, whatever that thing is. So, I knew nothing about it. And... I started to learn about it. And then when we figured out that this is actually... something that's going to become more prominent and necessary, because government is starting to really focus on... making digital accessibility a mandatory requirement... across departments and across government entities, we thought, well, there's going to be a need for people to learn what it is, and how to go about making content accessible. So, my disclaimer, Narelle, I'm not a subject matter expert in this field, by any stretch of the imagination. But I have been working with digital accessibility experts over the last two and a half years, which is the amount of time I've dedicated to this, which is indicative of how much of a problem I see this as being, and how much of an opportunity I see this as being.

The scale of the accessibility problem

Narelle: Okay, I'm going to ask the question. How much of a problem is it?

Bern: Well, we started doing some research in this field and we found that... there aren't readily available statistics as to how many people... face digital accessibility barriers, but there are all sorts of cohorts of people, some people with disability, some people with neurodivergence, other people with low literacy levels, people that are elderly, people that might be deaf, people that... come from culturally...

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linguistically diverse backgrounds that... face digital accessibility barriers. They simply can't do the things that I can do in... accessing and finding and using information on their computer. And that shocked me. At least one in five. At least one in five. It's probably more like one in four.

Narelle: Why did it shock you?

Bern: Because what that means is that 20 or 25 percent of people... out there, the population, can't access information on their computer.

Narelle: Did it shock you because it wasn't something you'd thought about? Or was it just the scope of the problem, or was it both?

Bern: It really shocked me because, for both reasons, actually, Narelle. We developed a course on business writing several years ago with a journalist here from Australia. And I asked him about it, he didn't know anything about it.

Narelle: Really? I would have thought a journalist of all, because we're talking plain English, we're talking... a heap of different-- Certainly that aspect of journalism... was obviously part of the... whole digital accessibility solution. But there's more to it, right? There's more about formatting documents, and using alt text and so on. That's all the different techniques that you use for... ensuring, ensuring documents are more accessible, ensuring websites are more accessible. But so that really shocked me. Firstly, the scale of the problem. That one in four, one in five people can't actually... do what I can do in finding information and using it on a computer. And the other thing that shocked me was that, when we started to research this, we found that... there's this seminal case, right? The case of Bruce Maguire versus SOCOG, where a blind man... could not access information about the Sydney Olympic events that he wanted to go to, and took SOCOG to court and won. But that was 25 years ago, 2000 Olympics. And... I thought, well, why hasn't... this problem been solved? Because that was 25 years ago. And from what I understand, less than, I've heard a few different versions of this number, but less than 20 percent of government documents... on websites are accessible. Which means that people that need to use government services, in a lot of cases, cannot use them. I don't know the actual percentage, but that wouldn't surprise me because it's a problem. For

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those that don't know, I actually am blind. It's a problem that I live with, daily. I had one today, and I'm trying to work out, I was opening an... email to find out some information, and I couldn't find it out.

Bern: What sort of email were you opening?

Living with inaccessible information

Narelle: It was an, they sent something as a HTML page, which I thought, HTML, brilliant. This will be no problems at all. Well, it was really, really hard. And there is no way a person... with... that's elderly, could have done it, unless they were techos, technical.

Bern: Yeah, right. Which must be incredibly frustrating for you. I mean, you're an expert in this field.

Narelle: And I'm technical. I eventually worked out what I had to do. But I shouldn't have had to do it.

Bern: So, even someone with your advanced IT skills and knowledge of digital accessibility, you're still facing problems every day. I remember you telling me the other day, your telephone bill, for example, bank statements, PDFs.

Narelle: Electric bills, gas bills, you can, everything. Body corporate bills, they're a nightmare.

Bern: You need someone to read these documents to you, correct?

Narelle: Yeah. So the next body corp bill, I've said to my sons, "Here, it's coming. I think there'll be a new BPAY number," because that's all graphics. So, they've just said, "Yeah," they read it. They send me the numbers, I pay the bill. I don't need anyone to pay a bill for me, but I've got to have someone to read the bill to make sure it's correct. And that's the other thing, people don't realise, I can't verify anything, because it's not accessible. I mean, so for you, when I'm sitting here saying these things, what are your thoughts?

Bern: I continue to be shocked, because... you're not the only one, right? And you know a lot more about this subject, and you're so much more skilled in this area

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with IT, using computers, you know, than, than probably most people our kind of age, right, and beyond. And you still face problems with it. So, how about everybody else, you know, that don't have people to read... this information to them? People that live on their own, for example. -

Narelle: Yep. -

Bern: And... And who do they get to help them? And the other thing also, really, that... makes me really wonder why governments haven't... focused on this, because I don't think it's that expensive to fix. I mean, it's a matter to me, and... please tell me if I'm oversimplifying this. You know, it's a matter of... training people on how to use the basic tools on your computer. You don't need any new software.

Narelle: That's it.

Bern: Basic tools on your computer to format documents and, you know, and use the techniques associated with creating alt text, you know, and making sure tables are formatted accessibly, and so on. I mean, it's not that hard to do.

Narelle: No, do you know where I think it? I could be wrong. They never experienced the problem. Everyone has had a flat tire at some time. So, you learn how to change a flat tire, or how to deal with the situation. Everyone has had a cut finger, so you've always got band-aids on hand. You know, all those things, those normal everyday problems. Everyone's run out of milk at some stage. They... Yeah, they've never experienced the problem. I... To me, it's really frustrating, but I don't think what people realise is how it... it's a lack of confidence that it creates in... the person that's sending the letter, or the bill or anything too, isn't it? Because... Bern, when you get a... let's put it this way. If you go and get... an address, right? We'll pick something simple. We'll get an address, you've got the name of the building and the address. And you think, "Oh, yeah, that's right." Then you go and, I think, Google Maps, let's pick Google Maps. And Google Maps says, "There's the name of the building up, but that's not the address. It's this address." Then you might say, "Okay, I better check this. I'll go onto the website." Because you've got something in an email, Google Maps, and now the website says, "Oh, it's actually that address."

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You've got the ability to say, "Oh, hang on here," and double-check it, and verify and work it out, right? I can't. I've got to,

Bern: What do you do?

Narelle: Well, I have to email the person I'm meeting, saying, "Can you please verify the address?" Or I just don't go. It's as simple as that. I have been in the situation with three different addresses, and I was halfway there, so I said, "Okay, well, let's go." And in the end, I rang the Summit organiser, and she said, "Oh, no, no, it's this address." It was someone who'd made a mistake. But that loss of confidence, and lack of, you don't trust things.

Bern: Yes.

Narelle: With...

Bern: And I think also it has an enormous... impact on the self-esteem... of people who have, who face digital accessibility barriers. The classic example that, when we were developing, so we developed an e-learning course on this. We called it MYDA, Making Your Documents Accessible. And this e-learning course, we created an animated video... of a person who has low vision, who required a screen reader, and was going into a meeting. And had to have the latest data to present to a group of stakeholders who were going to... make a decision about something. And... The table with the new information came in, and it was inaccessible. And so this person was stuck... trying to get... struggling with the numbers couldn't... deliver a convincing... story, and was, you know, shouted down by everybody because... they lost all confidence in standing up there, and basically... delivering this report. Because they weren't certain about the numbers, because when they played, and their screen reader read the table that the numbers were in, it came out as a blur of... non-contextual data that you couldn't make sense of. And this was an animated... example, but I spoke to a very leading Australian disability advocate... about this case and he said to me, that actually happens to me in meetings all the time. I get stuff that comes in on my phone, I'm supposed to understand it, and I can't, and I've got to

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Further discussion

Bern: get someone to read it to me. And so, I think that what happens is that people, you know, would find that kind of work environment, where no one is taking this seriously, where you are excluded, probably unintentionally, most likely unintentionally, because people don't think about it. People have no idea about digital accessibility.

How accessibility affects confidence and participation

Narelle: I agree with you there. What... You know, I... Is it just one section... that needs to change? Is it... How do you do this, Bern? How do we go about fixing this issue? We've talked about lack of confidence. We've talked about people not being able to pay bills. We've talked about people not being able to find information. - How do you-- -

Making accessibility mandatory

Bern: Make it mandatory. Mandatory in primary schools. Children use computers--

Narelle: In primary schools? - Okay. -

Bern: Yeah. I mean, look, it's no more difficult than learning how to cut and paste.

Narelle: Actually, that's true.

Bern: It's not. It's another function on your computer. You've got to know where it is and how to use it. And there's a number of different functions, right? But, you know, children, they just absorb this information. And if you make it... just something that they have to learn, they then start producing accessible documents, and accessible PowerPoints, and... accessible web content from the time they're kids. And... that then becomes ingrained in their nature. It's like learning how to spell, and write. And then it becomes part of the high school and university and workplace. And so, to me, I think that there's a pretty simple solution. Make it mandatory... in schools, so children learn how to make accessible documents. And... and... make it mandatory in all government departments, because, you know, government doesn't have any competition.

Narelle: No.

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Bern: You see the banks... tend to be... focused on this. They know that if they make their websites and the content on them accessible, they're going to attract that market, which means increased revenue, and market share. But the government's already got that, so there doesn't appear to be... any real genuine incentive... or any consequence for not doing it.

The business case for accessibility

Narelle: Bern, what would you say to that business person, I mean, that says, well, that does say one or two things. Number one, I don't have a person with disability that's a client. And number two, not doing this, it's just adding cost. It's just, I can't afford it.

Bern: Yeah.

Narelle: I mean, you're a business person. If you'd been told you've got to do this... 15 years ago, what would your reaction have been, without having the knowledge you've got now?

Bern: Yeah. Let me just go back and clarify something I just said about... making this... mandatory in government. I mean, there are certain government departments that are... very strong in this area, and full credit to them. They're making it mandatory, and doing training around this. And a lot of government... departments have websites with courses on them on how to make content accessible. You know, and I know that that is very, very much the case, but not everyone is doing this. Right? So, there are notable exceptions. But in business, basically what gets measured gets... done, right? And if you know that if you have a... if you realise that there's a percentage of people, a considerable percentage of your market out there, that... that need to see an accessible website, and need to be able to access the content on it, or they can't do business with you, well, then it's a very simple thing. It's a very simple investment. The return on investment is enormous, because it's not that difficult to do. And then you suddenly have all of these people that... couldn't use your website... that you'd never know about, right? But now they can. So, you'd see an uptick in the traffic coming through to you. And to those people who say, "Oh, look, we don't hire people with disability. We don't have anyone with

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disability in our group." Well, you'd be surprised, because... another statistic that really shocked me, is that 90 percent of disability is... invisible.

Narelle: Yes.

Bern: 90 percent of digital accessibility barriers... are invisible.

Narelle: Yep. Quite visible to see someone with a guide dog or with a wheelchair, but you don't know someone has dyslexia. And it's not as though people go around advertising the fact... that they are neurodivergent, for example. No.

Bern: So, you don't know. You're making a big assumption that... none of your customers... require digitally accessible content. That's something else that I've learned. I might be stumbling over the language, and saying the wrong thing. It's what I've learned. You just don't know. You don't know.

Narelle: You don't. I mean, I know people with brittle bone disease, and someone said, "Oh, they're not disabled." And I said, "Well, she's actually got brittle bone disease." You wouldn't want to live her life. I don't want to live her life. And she travels and she has a great time. But she knows, she takes nothing for her bones to break. I mean, the thing that I also will come back to, is... the other thing that I get quoted at me is the 80-20 rule, where 80 percent of your business... is generated by 20 percent of your customers. And the business person will be focusing on that 20 percent. So they'll say, "Well, why would I worry about the rest?" Well, what is the impetus to do it?

Creating accountability through KPIs

Bern: Well, if you look... at two, and I look at two different segments here, I'm looking at public sector, and looking at... what I call the private sector. And of course, there's all these grey areas in between. People, you know, as I said before, people... get measured, sorry, people are measured on their KPI achievement. - Right? -

Narelle: Yep.

Bern: So, unless this is in a KPI, people won't do it because there's no point.

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Narelle: Good point.

Bern: Right? At the end of the year, when I do my performance review with my boss, if there's nothing in there about, you know, creating digital content, content that's digitally accessible, well, then why would I do it? Why would I bother? You know, why would anyone learn this?

Narelle: This is good fun.

Bern: There's other things I've got to spend my time on. Why do I have to do that course? You know, is it another one of these fads that's going on? It's going to be, you know, like...

Narelle: Influences. -[Narelle

[Laughs]

Narelle: -

Bern: Yeah. Like, you know, gratitude, you know? I mean, do I really need to learn about that? I mean, there's all these different fads that come and go. Digital accessibility, what's all that about? I don't need to know about that. But if that's in your, in your KPI, and at the end of the year, your boss says to you, tell us what courses you've done in... digital access. Well, they can already tell anyway, because that's on the learning management system.

Narelle: Yeah.

Bern: And if you haven't done the courses in them, well, then that reflects in your performance review, and that makes a difference as to whether you get promoted, or whether you get the, get the bonus, or whether you get to keep your job or not, depending on what sector you work in. So unless there's some kind of consequence for not doing it, people won't do it, unless they can see the benefit. And some people are naturally... altruistic and will... think, well, I didn't know about that. That's really important. I should... go about making my content accessible. I didn't know, you know, that this was a problem in society, I'm going to do it. But a lot of people won't because it just doesn't, it's just, there's many things that they've got to think about. And I understand that, we've all got things to think about. So, unless it

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becomes something that gets measured, and there's a consequence for not doing it, I don't think we can expect to see... a massive uptick in the, in people... taking the time to learn how to do this. So, I genuinely believe that it really does need to have, you know, more... emphasis put on it... across the public sector.

Narelle: Yep.

Bern: You know, and... providing training that's pretty easy to do. It only takes a couple of hours to learn how to... make a Word document accessible. - Doesn't take long. -

Narelle: It doesn't.

Bern: And provide templates for people to be able to use them. You know, so that you don't even have to think about it yourself.

Practical tips for accessible documents

Narelle: You've already provided some good tips there. Keep going.

Bern: I believe, you know, I'm... really very much a novice when it comes to AI, but everyone talks about AI. I understand that, you know, AI... is a lot more effective if it's reviewing documents that have been made accessible.

Narelle: It is.

Bern: And so, again, there's all sorts of reasons why... people should take the time, learn how to do this, and, you know, you have no idea how many people are going to benefit from this. And if you're in private sector, you're going to get more customers.

Where the MYDA course goes next

Narelle: This is interesting. Bern, with all of this, where are you going to take the digital accessibility... knowledge that you've got? What are you going to do with it? You've got your MYDA, the MYDA course, -

Bern: Making Your Documents Accessible. That's a training program we've developed.

Narelle: Yep.

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Bern: We've actually had it implemented over in the UK, with the Royal Society for Blind Children. -

Narelle: Wonderful. -

Bern: And... They love the course. There's a school and a council over there that are using it.

Narelle: Wonderful.

Bern: We've trialled it here with some government departments, and we're still continuing to have those discussions. So, we're going to continue to push that. But also we've been looking at, you know, how do you make this... more than just a training course, more of a... more of an awareness program around... this whole concept.

Narelle: Which is where I met you.

Bern: Yeah, there's people... in your organisation that... have this issue that you probably don't know about, and that you will be helping so many people... by learning. So, we're continuing to make efforts in this area by continuing to talk to companies and government departments about it. We offer, you know, programs to people. We offer discounted programs to schools and so on, because we just really believe in it. I spent two and a half years on this, and... on a subject I knew nothing about two and a half years ago. -

Narelle: Yeah. -

Bern: So... It's made me look back at, I've written thousands of training proposals, sales proposals over the years, been in business for 25 years. I look back and none of them were accessible.

Narelle: Yeah.

Bern: Because I'd never heard of it. So, now everything I write, I create in an accessible format.

Narelle: And it's simple.

Bern: Yeah, it's not that hard to do.

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Advice for organisations and individuals

Narelle: No. Bern, what are some tips that you would, you know, other than what you've already said, that you'd give... to people that are listening? That business person, that government person, That... person with disability, a person where English is their second language. What are some tips?

Bern: Well, learn about this subject by... undertaking courses in it. There's a lot of courses on this. I mean, the one that we developed, MYDA, goes a lot into the why, why this is so important. There's a lot of courses that teach you how. But I guess when you understand the why, the huge impact that this has, the far greater reach that you have, the greater opportunity you have to serve your clients. When you realise the why, the how is easy because you want to help. You want to do something about it. So, learn about it, you know? Just... search up digital accessibility training.

Narelle: Yeah.

Bern: You know, have a look at MYDA and other courses.

Narelle: Have a look at DASAT because we do it as well.

Bern: DASAT, yeah, of course, you know.? And so... encourage your learning and development department within your, within your organisation. What are we doing about this? Are there courses on it? Speak up.

Narelle: Yeah. Cause you'll be doing so many people a favour, and you'll be helping so many people. We interviewed Dr. Dinesh Palipana, who was the second... quadriplegic doctor... in Australia. Dinesh Palipana, who's an Order of Australia recipient, You know, and he... very kindly... volunteered to create a video for us for our training program. And what he said was, you'll make a world of difference to so many people by, by making your documents accessible. Oh, yeah.

Bern: By learning how to do this.

Narelle: Yeah.

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Bern: Just from listening to the daily frustration that you have, Narelle, and knowing that that... is experienced by, you know, 20 percent of the population every day, it's just shocking. It really just continues to shock me. If you do work in government, if you work in a role where... you can have some influence in... implementing this type of training, please go and do, do something about it.

Contact details and closing reflections

Narelle: Yep. Really smart words, Bern. Bern, how can people contact you to keep talking about this?

Bern: Yeah, impact... corporatetraining.com. And my email is bern... at... goimpact.co.

Narelle: Wonderful. Thanks, Bern.

Bern: B-E-R-N. B-E-R-N, at goimpact.co.

Narelle: Thank you. Bern, I actually really love that primary school idea, because you're right. The young pick it up so easily. It becomes so natural. And I love the idea of mandatory. You know, we know we've got the Disability Discrimination Act, which is where it is, but no one's doing anything about it. There's not enough, the Act is nearly a toothless tiger because, as you said, Bruce Maguire, Sydney Olympic Games, and there's been other landmark cases since then. Nothing's happened. So, thanks, Bern. Thanks for your time today. And...

Bern: I would like to say, though, there are government departments that are serious about this, and they are doing a terrific job. I know the New South Wales government is right into this, and, you know, they are spending a lot of effort on making, you know, digital content... accessible. So, that's a great example of... someone that is doing something very positive about it. And federal government as well. But it just seems to be... You know, it's not a universal approach, and I think it needs to be.

Narelle: I agree with you. It does need to be, it needs to be in all aspects of society. And thank you for just coming on today, Bern. It's been a real pleasure. You've given me some things to think about. -

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Bern: Thank you. -

Narelle: Thanks. If you like what we do on The Digital Access Show. If there's others that you think, oh, they need to have a voice, please let us know. You can email us at... Well, you can contact us through The Digital Access Show, through our website, dasat.com.au. Like, share, subscribe, review. And we'll see you next week. Have a good week.

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