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The Digital Access Show

Season 3, Episode 39: Belinda Llamas

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Narelle: Hi, welcome to The Digital Access Show. About two months ago, we were very lucky to have… a team from the Provider Institute come and work with us to learn how to implement digital accessibility into their work. Today we have one of the founders of the Provider Institute, Belinda Llamas, to come along. And I want to find out more about the progress. Again, what are the issues? What are the things that she's noticing? And what are the things… that have been put on the back burner? Because, you know, I keep telling everyone, chunk it. Don't do everything at once. You can't. It's like anything. When you have a kid, you know that it's going to take quite a long time for that kid to grow up and move out. You can't expect them to do it all at once. It's exactly the same with this. So, Belinda, thank you so much for coming on the show.

Belinda: Thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

Meet Belinda and the Provider Institute

Narelle: Belinda, can you tell us a bit about yourself, and what you do?

Belinda: For sure. So, my name is, yeah, Belinda, and I am a Managing Director and Founder at Provider Institute of Australia. Our role has been, for the last eight years, monitoring compliance changes in the sector, which we know more recently has been coming thick and fast. And being able to break that down into meaningful… actions and steps that providers need to take to be able to implement and comply with those, those changes and requirements. And part of that is around having in place policies and procedures that an organisation needs to follow. So, we also provide guidance in that space. And… And that then leads to being able to… operate an efficient organisation that also… can meet its compliance requirements, especially

when coming into audit. And the ultimate goal of all of that actually… is to be able to provide services in a way that are meaningful for their clients.

Why policies and procedures matter for audits

Narelle: You mentioned the word audit. Why is… the work that you do important for the audit?

Belinda: So, If you're not familiar with the NDIS or aged care sectors, or any of the healthcare sectors, a provider does need to go through an audit… with a relevant body, and that's to demonstrate their compliance with particular standards. There are quite a lot of expectations on a provider in terms of those standards. So, they cover things from the governance of the business, so how the organisation is run and how you manage things, right down to how you're interacting with… a participant… on the ground. And so, when you're… going through the audit, one part of it is to have the correct paperwork in place. But more importantly is being able to demonstrate how you… do that in practice. How do you do that on the ground? And so, those procedures are quite meaningful, because… it's a way for you to evidence… how you've trained your staff to do things, how you then ensure that everybody in your organisation… is following the same process. So, it gives you consistency and a level of surety that things are being done in the appropriate way. And then that altogether creates the evidence for that audit. If you're not meeting the audit… criteria, then you could be found in breach, and have non-conformances, which means you then have to go and fix those matters up. And so, our work is around making sure… that your processes meet the expectations… in a way that's reasonable to run in your business, so that people can actually follow them.

Narelle: I had Sharon Floyd from Engels Floyd on, it'll be a couple of years now, and she was talking about the NDIS practice standards. And I think, I can't remember the number, but there was quite a large number of… or times that throughout the NDIS practice standards… is talking about communicating with the client in the way that the client prefers. Is that part of what you're talking about?

Belinda: Yes, yes, that's exactly right. And, yes, I do love Sharon. We do catch up on occasion. So, yes, that is something that filters through all of the standards. And particularly with the recent… supported independent living changes that have come

into effect, there's been an increased focus, you know, on how providers are implementing things. But that is coming back to how you're working with participants, and making sure that they can… have their voice heard… in receiving services.

Communication and accessible information

Narelle: Okay. I'm going to go off a bit topic here, because now I'm really, really interested, obviously. You know what I'm like. I'm always about good communication, and digital accessibility. And my experience with many providers… is, I'm not saying all, I'm saying many, they really don't think about it. I can go to an expo, and be handed a business card. Now, because I can't read business cards, that's quite… off-putting for me. But what it also does is give me a red flag to say that, well, they're already not considering how I communicate. Are those the type of things that you're talking about?

Belinda: Yes. Well, and I think that that's… Yeah, well, that's exactly right, because, you know, under the standards, you need to be able to provide information to people so that they can make an informed decision, and understand what's happening in relation to their care. So, being provided a business card that you can't read as an example, is a bad example, because you're not actually supporting that person to… see the information, understand what it is that you've been given. So, the standards are saying, well, in that case, you should look at other ways to make sure you can access that kind of information.

Narelle: So, one last question about this track. So, with the audits, when the audits happen, do the auditors know how to work out… whether a document's accessible or not, that it meets the accessibility standards?

Belinda: That's a great question. To be honest, I'm not sure that they would go to the extent… of reviewing a document in the way that maybe you and I have, and looking at the features of a document. I would say that they're gathering that information… through their interviews with participants, and get their feedback as to how they're being communicated with… would be the primary information they're using. And potentially they would be having a look at things as well. You know, if you've got… a document that's difficult to read, generally doesn't make a lot of

sense, even to somebody without, you know, challenges with reading or vision impairments. Then obviously, that's gonna… potentially raise some questions. But… I don't, you know, maybe with AI, that might be something that comes into play, where they can scan documents and get an accessibility… score on that, So, maybe we've just… [Belinda and Narelle laughs]

What the team learned about digital accessibility

Narelle: Maybe. Listen. So, when you came and we were talking about… accessibility, digital accessibility, what had been your experience up until then? Had you really thought about it?

Belinda: Honestly, I hadn't thought about it in the way that you brought to my attention. I know when we chatted earlier on, I, yeah, I had assumed that it was around explaining things, if somebody couldn't see. That was sort of my default. Whereas… now, I can see that, actually, it is broader than even just somebody that's got, you know, vision impairment, somebody that's struggling to read, for whatever reason, that all of these, these areas would help anybody… in being able to understand the information, or make decisions about, you know, services or… care… in a meaningful way.

Narelle: That's the interesting thing, because I think people just don't know. They really don't know what they don't know. And so, when someone asks, well, is your information accessible? Well, yeah, because I can pick it up and read it. And sometimes it just takes, I guess, this conversation, because I know for us, I've had that realisation and said, well, we can do better on our side of things. If, you know, providers are using our work, how can we improve what we're, you know, recommending, so that that then flows through to the end user?

Narelle: Yep.

Belinda: I agree. I think we need to raise the profile around it. And… And it actually is going to have a better impact more broadly… than just, you know, vision impairment.

Narelle: Yeah.

Belinda: You know, we think about… English as second language and all of those things. All of those things that we spoke about all make sense, you know, even just in terms of document layouts, and things like that would help broadly.

Narelle: Yeah. One of the things that I really loved when we were going through the training session is… I could just about hear people's brains going… absolutely manic crazy with, okay, I could do this here or I could do that there, or we will change that. And I hear it every time I run a training session. What… And the other thing I find is… you get sort of about… a quarter of the way into it, and people are going, my gosh, this is actually interesting. We've never thought about it this way. Was it a big change in mindset for your team, do you think? Or was it they knew parts of it, which is what I do think, but it was putting all the jigsaw pieces together to make the complete picture?

Belinda: Once you get through the full scope of training, everybody takes something away from that, because, yeah, there were aspects. Even if you take it down to something like a Facebook post, and we didn't, you know, realise necessarily that… all you might hear is image.

[Narelle laughs]

Putting accessibility into practice

Narelle: Tell us the whole process. How have you gone about implementing it? This is the… main thrust of what I want to get to today. I am really interested because every business is different, and everyone does things differently.

Belinda: Yeah. So for us, we've started with a small sample of documents, and we've started with our client-facing ones. We've got, for example, the consent form, and… service agreement, privacy statement, and I think we've got our emergency planning guide… that providers can use when planning… emergencies with participants.

Narelle: Yep.

Belinda: And essentially… applied all of our learnings from your session to those documents. As I mentioned, I think we've got the last couple of things to be able to

clarify with you, so that we can publish, essentially, those as our updated version of those documents for providers to be able to use on our platform.

Narelle: Yeah.

Belinda: And then as we create, and that's… where I do agree with you as well around, you know, it can't be all done at once. Things can definitely be done faster. We can utilise AI to be able to enhance things. I do think you need a bit of a weather eye on it before you just let it go for itself. But… we take the approach that every time we release a new document, it will be under the new accessibility, well, not criteria, but using those… document layouts, and set up to make sure that they are accessible when they get to the provider. And as part of that, we've also included instructions… in the document at the beginning. So, when they are creating their documents, for example, another thing that I wasn't aware is how you… get your Word document to PDF… makes a difference on what's kept. So, you know, we've got in the instructions there, make sure you save as to PDF, because printing to PDF will only give you an image.

Narelle: Yeah. It's the little things. I'm actually really fascinated with this. So, you've gone and built a whole policy around it for your organisation as well?

Belinda: We've got guidelines on creating the documents. Yep, you raised a fair point as to what that would look like as our overall organisational policy. But yes, in terms of being able to roll out our future work, that's what we're doing.

Training and bringing new staff on board

Narelle: What about… any new staff coming on? Have you thought about how you're going to… train them in it? What are your… What are the expectations of what they should already know, versus what you're going to have to train them in? Cause that's going to be an issue there too, isn't it? Because how many people know about it?

Belinda: Well, for us, if somebody is coming to work with us, then they would be shown… our processes. So, we do have, you know, like those guidance documents, and step-by-steps how to create a document, and what are our process flows. In terms of the induction, to be fair, I haven't had to do one in a little while, but… in

terms of the induction, we could include better information around accessibility. And… I guess the other… point to that, though, is when we're bringing new staff on, we always explain the reasons why we do things, though. So, you know, quite particular about, you know, if we're publishing information… for a provider, it's important to think about, well, what is the direct impact to them? And so, this is why we do some of these things. I think that information should also come a bit organically as you bring somebody on, explaining why you're even doing something.

Narelle: Yeah. What about… the extra effort that may have taken for the business? Has there been an extra effort to get this up and running?

Belinda: Not substantially. Yes, I have asked… one of my team to spend… time on those first set of documents that weren't initially scheduled for any particular update. So, that way we could get across, well, how's this going to work best? What's the way that we can do it in an efficient and effective way? And so, that initial, I guess, investment side of things, yes, there's been some time aside for that, but… I'm a big believer in trying to get things as just part of the way you do things, rather than, you know, build something, put it through another process, and then it's got to go through over here. Let's just make it the way it's done. And so, when we're then creating the next lot of documents, it's the way it's done.

The long-term benefits

Narelle: What do you think will be the long-term benefits?

Belinda: For us, it's the fact that… we're, we're creating a wider audience who can more easily… access, read, and understand the documentation. I think it will also… potentially… get others thinking about that too. So, if you think about the fact that our service is about providing resources for providers, what I hope… is that it means that when they see our new documents, it might also get them to think about, well, what are they doing in their organisation to make sure… all of their processes are accessible in a similar fashion.

Narelle: Yeah. So, you're hoping it's going to spread like crazy, which is my hope as well.

Belinda: Yeah.

Narelle: I know it's needed, and you know it's needed, and the approach that you've taken is a very sensible one, because it's been managing the cost to the business, hasn't it? Your, the bottom line, your dollars.

Belinda: Yeah.

Narelle: Go.

Belinda: Sorry, I was just going to say I think… at the end of the day, it's a small cost, to make sure… that more people can… access things that they should rightfully be able to access anyway.

Narelle: And did you have to buy any new tools to do this?

Belinda: No.

Narelle: That's what I often get told, we're going to have to spend thousands of new software. And I'm thinking, no.

Belinda: No. I mean, admittedly, I'm not a software provider in that sense. You know, and I've got a pretty great team that work with me on our website and our digital tools. But no, it hasn't. We have not had to invest in… additional tools, special computers, software, anything like that.

Narelle: Yeah.

Belinda: It's more the time, the time and knowledge to be able to set it up in the appropriate way from the beginning.

Narelle: And I think the bottom line with anything is, it's… as you said, it's the time and learning how to do it. But isn't that part of… a personal development of any business as well, or professional development of the business, that it's moving forward at any time?

Belinda: Absolutely. Well, you can even relate that back to what providers need to do with continuous improvement. So, you know, we take the same philosophy. Our organisation tries to continuously improve what we do, and make sure we're… adapting and growing and doing things in a better way. I was really excited that I was able to bring my team along to the training session with you. It wasn't just one

person that held the knowledge. Everybody could. And I'm also sure that as we go through, they'll be able to identify things too.

Practical tips for providers

Narelle: I'm sure of it because they're a very switched on team. Mind you, I do still owe you some Smarties. I must do that. I haven't forgotten! Every time I see your name, I think, oh, gosh, I owe Belinda some Smarties. What I was doing is, every time someone got an answer right, they got a Smartie. If they got a bit cheeky, they lost two or something, but we had this running count and I've got no idea who. I can't remember, but I've got to buy a box of Smarties, for the providers to check. Tell me, what are some tips? What are suggestions you can give to people that are listening?

Belinda: Probably my first… suggestion is think about what materials you provide and to who, and… maybe something so simple as to say, if you were to close your eyes and think about it, you could no longer see that document. How could they otherwise get it? And, and so then if, if you're thinking about, well, what do I prioritise or what do I focus on? What things will be most impactful to you straight up? And start work on those ones. And from there, look, honestly, I can't recommend your training enough, because if you haven't explored that area before, it's helpful to be able to speak to people who do know how to, who do know how to make… documents accessible, you know, your online presence more accessible, and explain that in a way that makes sense. And then map out, well, how can I progressively… put that into our business?

Narelle: Yeah. Because it's all about progression. It's not about… causing a business to go bust. It's about expanding the business. That's really what we want to see. Yeah, and thanks for those kind words about the training. I always have fun in the training. I was, yours I was really looking forward to. I've gone in a couple of times with some being a bit dubious, and by the end of it, I don't know whether they're going, oh my gosh, I can't believe I sat through that, or that was a lot of fun. But I always aim to have a lot of fun with it.

Belinda: It really was. Yeah, it was fun. It was really good.

Narelle: Well, the Smarties helped. You know, you've got to…

Belinda: In truer words, yes.

Narelle: It was virtual smarties.

Belinda: I think a couple of them got into the minuses, but that's okay.

[Narelle laughs]

Belinda: A bit too cheeky.

Contacting the Provider Institute

Narelle: Yeah. Belinda, thank you so much for coming on. How can people contact you to find out more about your work, and how you're implementing digital accessibility into your… everything you do?

Belinda: People are very welcome to come to our website. You'll find us at providerinstitute.au. And, yeah, welcome to have a look on there. We do, you know, have some videos on different things. Welcome to raise a support ticket with us for a request. We have got a phone number there that people can call. We can arrange a return phone call… at a time that suits them. And, yeah. More than happy to take, yeah, inquiries depending on what they need, or explain what our experience has been.

Narelle: I think the important thing from all of this as well, with the changes in the NDIS, there's going to be so many participants, like me, that won't have support coordination in the future. That's going to be gone. Plan management, we don't know what's going to happen there. And considering… there's an issue with accessibility and plan management, it's something that participants are very concerned about. And therefore, if we need to find a support, and we can't read your website, or we can't read your information, we'll find someone. But we don't want businesses to go bust… at the same time.

Belinda: But I feel like that's actually… the opposite… in the sense that, by not doing this, I feel like you're at a bit more risk of going bust, because you can get through to your audience if you take it on. So, even if we think about… going back to something like a simple Facebook ad, and if you're… posting information, so if you

think about it as a provider, you're posting this information out there to talk about all the wonderful services you have, here are some experiences of our participants, these are all the things that we can do to help you. If somebody can't go on there and click on it and see about it, they actually don't know. So, you've missed… You've missed a whole group of people that you could actually be providing some great services to. So, I think it's actually the opposite cost. If you don't, you're risking your business.

The importance of accessible services and closing

Narelle: Thanks, Belinda. It's what we try and teach people. Now, if you like what we do, please like, share, subscribe, review. We are coming to the end of The Digital Access Show season. I think Belinda's is the second last show that we're going to put up for the year, or third, I can't remember. Then we are going to be starting… a new season, taping it pretty well straight away. So, look, if you know of anyone that would like to come on, talk about, and we do want to talk to people about what good communication is, what makes up good communication, where are the digital accessibility barriers that they experience, and have a chat about it. Because the more we talk about the barriers, the more we talk about the very simple solutions, the better everyone's going to be. So look, I will see you next time on The Digital Access Show. Have a good week. Bye-bye.

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