

[Music] [Narelle] Good morning and welcome to another episode of the Digital Access Show. I'm Narelle. And, we have in the last month, five weeks, we've been looking at communication, looking at... What the barriers that still often are in communication. And it came down to lack of awareness. And we looked at what reasonable adjustments are in the education area. We then looked at how can people with disability empower themselves to step up and say, well, this is what we need, to be able to communicate, whether it's verbal, digital, whatever methods. And then last week, we looked at well, what is a true leader? And we had a lovely lady on that has a couple of neurological conditions and ASD. And she actually is a true leader. She had her own business. Well, this week, I wanted to swap it. And I want to talk about the NDIS providers and what they go through and why they feel communication needs to be worked on. And to do that, I've got Tania Gomez from Tania Gomez Consulting. Good morning and thank you, Tania. [Tania] Hi, Narelle. Thanks so much for having me today. [Narelle] You're welcome, Tania. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you aim to do what you're doing? [Tania] Sure. So I have been working with NDIS providers since the rollout of

the scheme about 11 years ago. Prior to that, I was a special needs teacher and then worked throughout vocational education and training. And the organization I worked for also had a disability provider. I was on their board for many years. And helped them with the rollout of the NDIS. And then really saw many people in my community, um, business owners really struggling with the rollout to really understand the compliance requirements. And I had done compliance audits in the VET space and I've done compliance audits in childcare centers and really always found it really easy to understand the government jargon and requirements and how to comply and demonstrate compliance at audit. And it's really quite an art and a skill to be able to go through audit processes. And so with the rollout of the NDIS, it seemed to really make sense with all of my different skills to move into helping providers. I've helped about 7,000 providers since 2013 and really helped them understand the very complex nature of the NDIS and helped them to demonstrate compliance through the audit process. I like to focus on building a strong foundation for their

business to grow upon so that they are just compliant by default, that their systems are compliant and they can be audit-ready at any time as opposed to prepping for an audit. We actually focus on building systems to be compliant in the first place. [Narelle] One of the things I find really interesting is I don't think - as a participant myself, I don't think participants are really aware of the amount of compliance, the amount of regulation that support coordinators, support workers, people in the NDIS provider area have to follow. [Tania] Yeah, it's huge. And the requirements are really complex. The standards, there's 36 areas you can register for as an NDIS provider and all of those areas are linked back to the practice standards. And the practice standards, as a result, have to be really grey. So there's a lot of uncertainty of providers if they are complying or not because the standards in some areas are very grey and open to interpretation. And then they're very prescriptive in other places and sometimes those things that are prescriptive, don't really make sense to your business because you might be an NDIS provider,

but you might not be offering the same type of supports that have kind of been written in the standards. So, it's a constant stressor for providers. Am I doing the right thing? Am I following the rules? Can I demonstrate at audit or am I going to pass? I feel like I'm doing the right things. I'm working really hard. But am I going to fail at audit because the auditor wants something different than what I've done or I can't explain it well. And yeah, there's a lot of really complex requirements for providers. It's- it can be really challenging. [Narelle] And very stressful. [Tania] Yeah, really stressful. And there's really no one who helps you other than people like myself. The NDIS commission isn't there to educate providers on how to do a good job. They're not there to remind them of their responsibilities. They're there to regulate and to enforce penalties when they've done the wrong thing. So it can be really lonely, especially for a small business owner, navigating a whole lot of complex requirements by yourself with no support. It's, um... It's challenging. And that's actually the reason I do what I do is to support small or medium businesses to really... to thrive and to continue doing the amazing work that they do. [Narelle] Tania, one of the

things I find interesting with the standards is -

is there any mention about communication with people with disability in the form or... [Tania] There is. There's

a standard that says... there's a few standards that mention that providers need to communicate in the mode of communication that the participant is most likely to understand. But even that is quite grey. Um... Even though it's

quite grey, when the standards first

rolled out in 2019, all of the auditors were

told that that meant easy-read documents

that everyone needed to have

easy-read documents. And if you didn't,

you would fail them. But you know, we've

got lots of pushback from.. from people when

I was auditing them saying, well, you

know, my client doesn't need an

easy-read document. That's insulting

to their intelligence or it's, you know, if

someone has vision issues, they're not

going to be able to read the easy-read

document that you've printed out in their

welcome pack. And so, now we kind

of a little bit... more - we have a little bit

more understanding as auditors about what

that standard means. When I'm consulting

to people around how they do that,

I try to tell them to just tailor their

communication. And to be really clear on

what their participants need. And to realize that maybe not all - no two people will communicate in the same way. And to really think about what that participant needs. But that can be a challenge, and that takes a lot of experience. And, if you're a brand new support worker who hasn't worked for a long time in the space, you might not know about how to tailor your communication, and how to work with participants to make sure that they understood you and that you're meeting their needs. [Narelle] But what can a participant do to assist in that area? [Tania] Well, I think participants need to be vocal about how their needs need to be met. So talk to them and saying, look, thank you so much for, you know, for sending me over that service agreement and that wonderful welcome pack of 500 pages, but you've sent it in a PDF and I actually can't read that. It's, you know, can't go through my screen reader or, you know, when I was on your website, you had some really interesting... I was able, someone told me that you had a really great website, but I couldn't actually get on it because it was not accessible. And just making the point, and asking for better, explaining the needs, explaining how to do it and taking that responsibility to tell your providers how they can do it better. And I find that most

providers are really responsive to feedback from participants on how to meet their needs. And they really do want to do a really good job. They want to care for participants. They want to provide them support. And they want to be good at it. They just need some direction and some guidance. [Narelle] And often too, the support coordinator, they're not going to be a technical wiz. You know, they're not going to be the person that knows how to put a website together so it is digitally accessible, or how to create a document that is structurally sound and accessible. They've got other skills in other areas and they will rely on the web developer or whoever's created the document templates for them. That that is accessible. [Tania] Yeah, I don't know if even it's on the radar for a lot of providers. I think when I'm talking to providers, they've bought their policy pack from a policy company. They've given it to them in Word documents. They've put them on their computer. They're printing those out and filling them in by hand. And they're not even really aware of digital accessibility in any way. It's a challenge, definitely, but they don't have the tech skills and they probably have never

thought about it. They've never encountered it themselves. [Narelle] Yeah, and that's what I often find as well. And I find a lot of people with disability as well. I... It saddens me when I hear that people with disability just expect not to be able to communicate because they've always never been able to communicate, or read the document or use a computer or use a phone because they've never been taught that you can. And there's such an impasse there. But I'm not sure how to get around it. What are your thoughts? [Tania] Yeah, I think it's everyone's responsibility to aim towards better communication. And I guess the term communication is very broad, but when you're working directly with another person, regardless of the relationship in any service, you want to first and foremost know that your client is secure in your services, that you have rapport with that person and you build - you're building trust with that person. And you can do that in many ways, but a lot of that comes down to communication, whether it's body language, whether it's tone of voice, whether it's, you know, written communication. Um, you build relationships with people by communicating - by making them feel like you've

understood them. So for a participant,
or for anyone, to just be okay with the
fact that they're never going to understand
or never going to be heard, or never going
to have their point of view understood,
is really sad and kind of impinges on human
rights not being met, right? It really is excluding people. I think we've
come
a long way, but we obviously have
a lot longer to go. [Narelle] Yeah. One of the things
that I do know is when providers get digital
accessibility right, it really is a good
basis for their business. It really strengthens
their business, doesn't it? [Tania] Yeah, absolutely. There is a
requirement
to communicate in the way the participant's
going to receive it, but there's also
a standard that says that you need to
give opportunities for people with disability to
input into your business. And so, it's not a very
hard thing to do to ask your participant
a few more questions to figure out their
communication needs, to figure out their
needs, to figure out what is going to
work best for them. But it does take a
little bit of time and it does take the
intention of really truly being invested in meeting
that person's needs. And so I think, you

know, the issue there is that, we don't have a lot of time in the NDIS. There's not a lot of extra budget for things like training. So it really does come down to that providers having the best intentions and having that attitude of, I'm going to keep doing this until I've met this person's needs, until I know that I've done a good job. [Narelle] I know for me with my plan manager, she's working really hard to set up the funding reports in a way that are accessible for me because the third party provider, where the funding reports come from, it's not accessible for me. So she's really going out of her way. She's gone, she's done the training. And the bonus, as she says herself, is it won't be just accessible for me. It's going to be accessible for all her participants, because we all need the same thing. We all need to read it, understand it, and just be independent. And that is going to be a win-win for her. And the other thing is it will be a win-win in one way for the NDIS, because costs will be lowered as well as the mental... The fact that I'm going to be more independent - mentally, emotionally, it's going to be a much

better situation for me. [Tania] Yeah, absolutely. That's the type of intention

that you need, that idea of, I'm committed to getting

this outcome with you. I'm committed to

working through, meeting your needs, to figuring

out what that looks like. And I think sometimes

providers just don't know until

someone says, hey, look, I can't access this. I know in my business, we used

to run 30 webinars a month. And we did this for years. And then, once

someone came and said, look, we're deaf, we can't

actually hear the webinars. And this was before we had

closed captions on everything. And when they made that point,

I was kind of horrified. I'd never even thought

about the fact that that was something

that we needed to do. It hadn't crossed

my requirements list. It wasn't something

I'd thought about. And I thought it

was quite tech savvy. I thought I was

quite across things. But it wasn't something

I'd considered. But since that

point, for someone standing up and

saying, look, actually, we're paying you for a service,

you need to do better. This is how we actually

worked out with them. How can we do this? And we asked for

their help in that. Now, technology has

come so far that you can do things like

that quite easily. But until someone

is actually showing you a need, there's no impetus for a NDIS provider to go and get a digitally accessible website. It's just an extra cost, just an extra thing to do. Until actually someone says to them, hey, look, you're going to get, you know, 20% more participants can access your site by doing these three things. And even just running through that business case, okay, it's going to cost you... I don't know. I'm going to throw a number out that I have no idea. Say it's going to cost you \$1,000 to redo your website to be digitally accessible. So that's going to be, you only need to get two extra participants this year to pay that back, or one, or three months of support. If you actually did that business case for someone, it would be no brainer. It's just actually making that decision a requirement. In the NDIS, providers have so much, so many things coming out them all the time. It isn't really a priority until someone makes it a priority. Until a participant says, look, I need better. I deserve better. This is simple for you to do. And you need to do this now. I think if all participants with communication needs, which, you know, could be the majority, actually gave their providers a list of how to better meet their needs, I think most providers would do everything they can to

meet those requirements. [Narelle] Yeah,
I agree with you. And it's not just
people with disabilities. It's English as a
second language. It's, people are
just getting older. They all benefit
from ensuring that the communication is
much better, don't they? [Tania] Yeah. And it
could... everybody at times [has] challenges
with communication, like you could just
be having a really bad day and need
things simplified. Or you could, you
know, you could be, as you said, English is
a second language. There's so many
people who require assistance with communication. People who are
dyslexic, you know, there's just so many
varieties of people and there's so
much neurodiversity now, I suppose we could call it. That not meeting...
not every participant is going to have the same
communication needs. So, tailoring that, and I
think coming from an early childhood
background, this is always something that you just
do in early childhood. You just meet the
child where they're at because, no
two-year-olds are the same. They develop differently. So you just meet
them where they're at. You don't expect them to be
anything other than who they are. And you don't make
assumptions about their skill level or

where they're at. You, you know, observe it,
you test it, you observe it. And then you figure out a plan. And I think that's always
just carried through with me, and I sometimes look at
how we treat adults with disability or
just adults in general, you know, English
is a second language as the other
example, and go, okay. But, you know, if
they were three, we would be trying
so much harder to adjust to them and figure out
how we're going to teach them. But as soon as
they hit 17 or 18, we're no longer interested
in meeting individual needs. We're now trying
to make people fit in our boxes so that
we can systemise and streamline and make
our jobs easier, as opposed to taking
that extra effort to really make sure
we're communicating the way that people understand. [Narelle] I really
like
what you said about assumptions, because
I've got this thing at the moment, it's
breaking the beliefs. And it's exactly that. Test your beliefs. Test your
assumptions. Are they based on fact? Yeah, it's just such an
important thing to do. And, I think it is the
participants that have to... And I can understand it's scary. It's so
incredibly
scary that must be, I came to disability
later in life. But it must be
incredibly scary for someone that's

always had disability to suddenly start

saying, or be expected to say, this is how I want it. [Tania] Oh, yeah.
[Narelle] It must

be terribly scary. [Tania] The first couple of

years of the NDIS, a lot of the

feedback from the community that I

was working with was, we're saying, these NDIS goals, we're asking
participants what

they want and they have no idea. Nobody in their lives have

ever asked them what they want. They have no idea

what to choose from. You know, and so that role of

support coordinator was really around, okay, well, let's help you think
about

what your goals will be. Because people,

especially people with intellectual

disability or most disabilities have

spent their whole lives being told, you can

do this, you will do this, this is how

it's going to be. As opposed to this,

the new way of doing things, which is okay,

well, what are your goals? What are your needs? How are we going

to get you to live a normal life like

everybody else? And flipping that took

a really long time for the whole of the

disability community, I feel, to get their

heads around this idea of it's

now what you want. So, you know, there's a

lot of pressure in that, right? It's kind of like

when you turn 18 and you get your first

car and you're like, wow, I can go anywhere. I can drive anywhere. And that's scary to

have to make those decisions, potentially

without any understanding of the

options, the choices, the consequences, the risks and having to navigate through that. And I think that's

kind of the same. [Narelle] Yeah, I agree. Tania, what are a

couple of takeaways that we can leave

people to ponder on? [Tania] I think the main

takeaway would be that it's everyone's responsibility

when it comes to communicating. That it's not the participants'

responsibility only. It's not the providers'

responsibility and it's also not the NDIS

commissions' responsibility. Everyone has a

different role in ensuring that participants'

needs are met and that that communication

is happening. The second takeaway

would be that every single person has different

communication needs. No two people are the same. And maybe no

two people on, you know, maybe not

the same person on different days has the

same communication needs. So, really tailoring

communication, and that kind of comes

back to that feedback loop of communication

isn't just what's sent. It's how it's received. So, what mechanisms

are in place to check that communication,

to make sure that the message you've sent has

been received as intended. And that we're not

just communicating in a tick-box way to say,
okay, we've done an easy read, but we're actually
understanding people's needs. Because that's really
the only way we're going to improve
communication and improve outcomes
for participants. [Narelle] Thank you. Tania, how can people contact
you after the conversation? [Tania] Sure. [Narelle] After
the podcast today. [Tania] Sure. You can go to
my website at taniagomez.com.au. Or I'm on all of the social channels, so
you're
welcome to follow along or message me on any of
the social media platforms. [Narelle] Thanks again, Tania. It's been a
real
pleasure having you on. And like every
episode, I've learnt some things that
I love learning. So, if everyone,
anyone likes what we do, what we're talking
about, please like, subscribe, share,
review, feedback. I love feedback,
whether it's good, bad, ugly, because
I love learning. And this is the Digital Access Show and we'll
see you next time. See you later. [Music]