

[intro music] [Narelle] Good morning,
good afternoon. Bongiorno. Ciao. Arrivederci, or wherever
you are in the world. Yeah, a lot of it's Italian, but hey, that's the
only
other language I really know. A little bit of Braille. Today on the
Digital Access Show, for those that don't
know me, I'm Narelle. But today on the
Digital Access Show, we are really still exploring
the theme of usable, digital communication. Last week we really looked
at clarity and conciseness. This week, I'm going back to the
usable digital communication in its entirety for a really special reason.
I am sick of auditing websites
that just don't meet the grade, you know? And yeah, I'm on
my frustration day, because I'm halfway through
a website that's really good and I know the next one is
going to just drive me crazy. So to do this, I've actually brought
on a very special lady, a very special guest,
Emma Bennison. Emma has been the CEO
of Blind Citizens Australia, and she stopped that
about, I think, 18 months ago, maybe two years ago. And Emma's got
so much experience. She studied.
She's done some great stuff. I'd like you all to meet a very
lovely lady, Emma Bennison. Emma, thank you so
much for doing this. [Emma] Oh, no problem. Thanks
for having me, Narelle. [Narelle] Emma, I've given a
little bit of a brief intro. Tell me a bit of
all about yourself. I'm having a word bad day. -A bad salad word day.
-[Emma] That's OK. [Emma laughs] [Emma] Um, sure. So, um, yes, absolutely
was the CEO

of Blind Citizens Australia. It was an amazing, um, privilege to hold that role

for about five years. Um, I also am currently, um,

the Chief Innovation Officer at an organization called

Life Without Barriers, which is one of

Australia's largest, um, providers of community services. So it goes beyond disability to

Child Youth and Family Services, homeless services,

immigration services, etc. Um, and it's a very

large organization, and my role is about embedding

lived experience perspectives, um, of the people we employ and the people we support,

um, across the organization. And of course, that

very much links in with how we make sure that

our systems and processes and communications

are accessible. And, look, before that, I spent a long time working

in the arts and cultural sector, and particularly in the

arts and disability sector, and, um, a lot of that work

centred around accessible

communication in the arts. Um, I'm a particular advocate, and very passionate advocate for

audio description, for example. Um, and I was the, the

CEO of Arts Access Australia, and also Access Arts in

Queensland before that. So, um, I'm also a parent, um, and have two, two, well almost adult children. So, and a musician

in my spare time. -[both laugh]

-[Narelle] In your spare time. [Emma] Not that I

have much of that. -[Emma laughs]

-[Narelle] No, no. And, what was one, what was the one

attribute that you brought to every one of these jobs that gave you the edge

over everyone else? [Emma] That's such

a good question. Honestly, I think it's probably my, um, my ability to, um, to be, equal parts firm and diplomatic in the way that I, um, lead. So, and, and advocate. So, um, I'm very much

someone who wants to see, you know, change, but I'm also someone

who wants to understand why the change hasn't happened from the point of view of people

that might block that change. I think if you

don't understand the people that you're kind of, um,

up against, so to speak, um, then it's very

difficult to get that, to get that change

to, to happen. So, um, I think, you know, being able to put myself

in other people's shoes um, and try to to kind

of give them something that's going to

be useful to them, but that's also going to get

the change that I, I'm seeking, has probably stood

me in pretty good, pretty good stead

over the years. [Narelle] Excellent. Actually, that's given

me a couple of thoughts. -So thank you.

-[Emma laughs] [Narelle] Emma,

what to you is usable, digital communication? [Emma] I think usable is

such a great description. I'm so glad we're talking

about it through that lens, because you can have

communication that's accessible, like it might meet the

accessibility standards, but that doesn't make it usable. And it's really hard

to pinpoint what that, um, what that difference is, but I think for me, it's about

something that actually, um, content that is actually pleasant to interact with, Um, content that doesn't make me feel like I am being othered. In fact, I was just having a conversation before I came on to this, um, to this programme about the fact that while it might be really nice to, to have a toggle, for example, that says, at the top of a website that says, you know, click here if you'd like the accessible version, or click here if you'd like the play-in language version. That's not really accessibility, because that immediately makes me feel unwelcome, because I've, I've been put into a box, and I'm told I have to go over there, because I'm different. So for me, it's about being, it's about seeing that people have thought about the way that they're communicating digitally, and that I've been a part of that thinking. And there are some really subtle but important ways that people can do that, um, you know, through things like image descriptions, or, um, you know, making sure that their buttons are labelled, or, you know, anything that you can think of. But, but, but those sort of subtle but important things are things that make me feel welcome. Um, and make me feel included, um, whereas, yeah, telling me to go somewhere else, yeah, just makes me feel like I've been put in a box. And that's, it might look like accessibility, but it's not. [Narelle] Yeah. I've got to agree with you there. I think one of my big bug bears at the moment is

when you get in a menu, and you're tabbing through, and you cannot get out of that

menu by hitting your escape key. -[Emma] Yeah.

-[Narelle] You just keep going. And then if you've gotta do that

five or 10 times, -[Emma] Yeah. It slows you down.

-[Narelle] It's just... [in unison] Slows you down. [Narelle] And it frustrates you. [Emma] It does. And I

think the other thing is, now I'm getting

on my hobby horse, um, but that there is, there

is an inherent assumption that people with disability, you know, aren't employed, don't work, don't have

anything better to do. Therefore we've all got time to navigate these

inaccessible processes. And, and the other one that

I get really frustrated about, and it's been happening for

as long as I can remember, is, um, the front

end of a website, for example, might

be accessible. A good example of this

is when I was a CEO, I often had to sign

funding agreements. And often with, with

government departments whose responsibility was

to people with disability, that people with disability

were the reason they existed. And it would so

often be the case that they would say to me, oh yes, here's the

funding agreement. And it would be an

inaccessible PDF. And I would say, um, can you give me that

in an accessible format? And they'd say, oh. Oh, all our brochures and all of our front

end communications that are client

facing are accessible, but we didn't really think about

making our forms accessible. And I said, yeah, and the inherent assumption in that, is that a person with disability would never be running an organization. And that's why, you know that's a real problem, because it, it just makes me sit there and go, okay, you've really never even thought that I would have that capacity, or that anybody else would have that capacity. And so it's, it's not just about the fact that the form's inaccessible. It's about the fact that you've just told me that your expectation, and therefore the expectations of society, are really low. And that's a problem when you're running a department that's trying to enhance the rights of people with disability. So it matters. It doesn't just matter from a, a usability perspective. It matters because of what messages you might be sending. [Narelle] You are so right. I think I have the same issues, even down to, um, my brother. He's a financial planner. And I had to change, you know how you've got your beneficiaries that you have to nominate? -[Emma] Yeah.

-[Narelle] He said to me, oh, you've got to update this.

And I said, Oh, okay. And he said, I said, Well, just send me, and I'm thinking, okay. I'll just test it. And I got it, and I thought, this form is not accessible. So I said to him, oh, not accessible. -I'm thinking you're my brother.

-[Emma] I know. -[Emma] It's disturbing.

-[Narelle] Need more awareness. And, you know, I'll give him credit. He goes, okay, so get one of your boys. And I said, okay. And I've still got the giggles, because he actually, my son tried, and Stu said, oh. He said, It didn't get

filled out correctly. Just give me the information. I'll fill it out. And he said without thinking, what's your birthday? And he said, yeah, don't worry about that. [Emma laughs] [Narelle] But the point is, people really don't know what they don't know, -[Emma] No.

-[Narelle] This is frustrating. -[Emma] Yeah.

-[Narelle] Instead of asking us. [Emma] Yeah, yeah. [Narelle] Yeah, it is... [Emma] Yeah. Well, I mean

the inherent assumption is that, um, I mean, your example there, the inherent

assumption is, oh, well. It's, you know, it's

probably accessible. People, people don't

even think about it. So they just assume

that it's going to be okay, because, you know,

you can use a computer. Um, but not all forms

are created equal, right? -[Emma] So, um...

-[Narelle] That's it. [Emma] It's just something that

people haven't thought about. And, and so I think the other, the other piece that's

important to be cognizant of is, um, that it's, it's exhausting, um, constantly having to

advocate for accessibility. And, um, I don't think that, we as people with disability

are always very conscious of how much additional

energy that we, um, expend on on actually just getting

from one day to the next, in terms of accessibility, and how much advocacy

we actually have to do to make that possible. [Narelle] Yeah. I think the biggest shock

to the system for me, because I actually

lost my sight. I was about 42 when I started losing my sight. And about three years ago, four years ago, I actually lost all functional sight. -[Emma] Right.

-[Narelle] And it was overnight. -[Emma] That must've been scary.

-[Narelle] I was lucky. I'd... [Narelle] It was, I was prepared for it. I had done a lot of

work to prepare for it. And that's where I was lucky. I was prepared for it, but I had put the time in,

learning the cane skills, learning the dog skills,

learning screen reader skills. Learning everything that I'd

need that life would just go on. However, I was in a

camper van with a friend, because we'd

gone out to wineries. -[Emma] Yeah.

-[Narelle] And... that was exhausting. The rest of the

day and the next, and I'd hit about seven. I was just exhausted. Because of that

extra concentration. [Emma] Extra mental line, yeah. -Yeah.

-Yeah. Just to do what

anyone else could do. -[Emma] Yeah.

-[Narelle] It just doesn't go away. -It's never going to go away.

-[Emma] No. [Narelle] And it must be the

same for a person with hearing, -Or cognitive impairment.

-[Emma] Absolutely. -[Narelle] It doesn't matter.

-[Emma] Yeah, yeah, yeah. -[Emma] No.

-[Narelle] It's an extra load isn't it? [Emma] It is. Yep. [Narelle] What do you

think is the state of... usable digital communication

in Australia today? Is it good? [Emma] Well, I'm an optimist.

I'm an optimist. And so, um, I would say, that if you had to be blind, or if you had to be disabled, um, in some ways, you would have to say that this is the best time for that, because we have so much accessible. You know, we have so much adaptive technology that we didn't have 20 years ago, right? So things are better, I think, than they used to be. What worries me, though, is that... because of that, perhaps to some extent, um, I think, I think organizations are being let off the hook. And what I mean by that is that, sometimes there's just a sense that, oh, yeah, well, you know, people with disability have all this technology, and they've got the NDIS and so we don't have to worry. You know, everything's all right. Now I, I think that actually, um, it is becoming less and less acceptable, especially, you know, with the findings of the Disability Royal Commission and various other things. It is becoming less and less acceptable um, for communications to be, digital communications to not be accessible. And so, um, I think what's, what's actually going to start to happen is, that we're going to see a lot more pushback from people with disability when we don't have our accessibility, our access requirements met. But I do think that whilst the adaptive technology is improving, um, there is not enough attention being paid to, um, the accessibility of websites, the accessibility of apps. There's a, there's a very near enough is good enough approach, I think, being taken, um, to accessibility. And I think the onus is being, um, it continues to be on people with disability to demonstrate why something is inaccessible, whereas, in fact, the onus

needs to be on, on business to, um, to demonstrate that something is, and I think if we could make that shift, and part of it is repurposing our human rights legislation. It's not just about accessible communications. It's a broader issue. But I think it's really easy to see examples in the accessible communication space where, um, where this could really be flipped. And if we could flip the, the script on it, um, we would be a hell of a lot better off, I think. And a lot less exhausted, let's be frank. [Narelle] And I think it also means that, a lot more people with disability will be working. And they wouldn't be so reliant on the government. [Emma] Yep, yeah. And that's, that's the business case. That's a business case for doing it. You know? If we weren't spending, um, so much time, you know, trying to make things accessible, or, um, you know, not being able to work in the industries that perhaps we worked in previously for people who might have acquired their disability, um, you know, having to move out of those industries, then we would be benefiting the economy. -[Narelle] Massively.

-[Emma] So it makes sense. But I think the other point that people forget, and it's a really basic one, but it's that, any time that you make something accessible for a person with disability, you're actually making the

process better for everyone. That's why I get on my hobby horse about, let's not make a separate accessible, you know, site for somebody. Because, actually, um, you know, you can make things accessible without losing the visual elements of it. You know, you can have both coexisting. For example, like if you're talking from a blindness perspective, you can, you can definitely have things coexisting. But you know, if I think about, I don't know, text messaging is always a classic example. You know, text messaging came about because, um, it was a, um, it was an adaptation for people who are deaf. And now we all benefit from it. I don't think anyone would like to live in a world where we couldn't text. So, you know, that's a classic example. I mean, the other one is audio books. Everybody loves audio books. But they came about because of people who are blind. So, um, I just think we need to start thinking about... accessibility as an asset rather than a deficit. And we need to think about what can be gained from it, rather than seeing it as something that's going to be, you know, expensive, and time consuming, and all of those things. It doesn't have to be, especially if we build it in from the ground up. So I think we just need to start thinking about it differently and talking about it differently. [Narelle] Yeah, and that's it.

The other thing, I think, is... we could use the big stick. But the big stick always generates... aggression, upset, frustration. All those negative emotions. And yeah, obviously

the big stick is, we can sit there and say, hey. You're breaching the Disability Discrimination Act. But you know, I don't think that's the answer. I really still think the answer is people being proactive. -[Emma] Yeah.

-[Narelle] and asking for it. Someone said to me the other day, in the 30 years they've been in business, they've never been asked for an accessible document. -[Emma] That's incredible.

-[Narelle] My comment was... [Narelle] Yeah it is. My answer back was yeah, but you know, in that 30 years, people with disability were told they shouldn't expect this. [Emma] That's exactly right.

The expectations are too low. And that's, that's the problem we have. -[Emma] Yep.

-[Narelle] Yeah. [Emma] I was talking to a group of people the other day about accessibility. And I said, you know, it's everybody's responsibility. And what I meant by that was, it is, it is the

responsibility of, um, of, of allies to think about it, and to actually look at life through an accessibility lens. It's equally the responsibility of people with disability not to go, oh yeah, we're fine. Everything's fine.

We'll, we'll manage. We need to start actually speaking up and saying, no, actually, that's not okay. What we really need is this, because unless we ask,

people don't know. So it is on us as well, I think. [Narelle] I actually agree with you fully. It is on us as well. And it's on our

families as well. -[Emma] Yeah.

-[Narelle] If we're independent, then our families are not "needed." -And I hate the word needed.

-[Emma laughs] There's some things I'll never be able to do again. I can't drive a car, but I can walk on a bus. -[Emma] Absolutely. Yeah.

-[Narelle] Yeah. [Emma] Can I tell you a quick story about that actually? [Narelle] Yes. [Emma] We, we were on a cruise, um, and my, my

husband is also blind, and our, our two kids can see. And, um, one of the crews staff

put a piece of paper, stuck a piece of

paper on our door, asking if we could

call the reception so that they could read

the, um, daily schedule to us. And of course, one of

my children just said, Oh, my God, this is hilarious. I'm going to call them

and advocate for this. And it was so funny because

she called up and she said, now, look. Do you realize what you've done? You know, you've put a

piece of paper on our door with print on it, that my parents

can't read, and now, you know, I'm having

to spend time calling you to try and, um, you know, get you to understand

the problem with that. And then said, why couldn't

you have just called my parents? And that I wouldn't

have had to get involved? [both laugh] -[Narelle] I love it.

-[Emma] It's so funny. And she did such a good job. I think she was only about

sort of 12 or 13 at the time. And I thought,

my God, this child. I've created, you know, I've created an

advocate without even, without even realizing it. [Narelle] That's exactly what it is. I know when my kids were, you know, like younger when I first started losing my sight, We'd go somewhere.

And it wasn't just my boys. -[Narelle] It was their mates.

-[Emma] Friends, absolutely. [Narelle] And it'd be so funny. We'd be, I'd say, Oh, come on. I'll take whatever kids are there. We'll just go to somewhere, or whatever. -[Emma] Yeah. Yeah.

-[Narelle] And... we'd be, you know, walking along. Next minute, and I never knew which kid, the elbow would be shoved in front of me. -[Emma] Yep.

-[Narelle] At eye height. -[Narelle] There you go.

-[Emma] It's true. [Narelle] Okay, and you just keep walking. And you think, oh, okay. Is it Daniel or is it Brady? Or is it... -[Emma laughs]

-[Narelle] Like, who is it? [Narelle] You feel the elbow, because they think it's normal. [Emma] Well they

do, and it's wonderful. That is, like, of all the, I mean, sometimes in this work,

and I'm sure you're the same. You know, I can sometimes feel

a little bit despondent about, you know, where we're going. But, but then I

look at those kids, And I just think,

holy, you know? It's, they are, they are really

going to change the world, because they really

do think it's normal. Not all kids, not all

kids, get that exposure, but there are more of

us who are parenting, and more who are getting
out into the community and having the experiences. And I think really,
that's
where it's at, you know? The more we can give those kids those
experiences
at a young age, the, the better things
are going to get. So, you know that gives me hope. [Emma laughs]
[Narelle] Emma,
with all of this, what's the takeaway
you can provide for everyone that's listening? What's a bit of advice or...
or just something that... [Emma] There's so much.
So much advice. But honestly, my
biggest piece of advice is... just talk to us. Like, if you're not sure,
don't make assumptions. Actually just ask lots
of curious questions. Like, if there was
one sort of, um, attribute I would like people
to come to the table with when we're having these
conversations, it is curiosity. And I don't mean
the kind of curiosity where you're just
being voyeuristic and asking
inappropriate questions. I mean, curiosity that enables you
to put your defences to one side And, um, you know, rather than coming to
the
table trying to justify yourself and trying to make
yourself feel better, just come to the table
with with a curiosity that allows you to
ask us questions rather than making assumptions. And that really enables
us
to have a genuine interaction, um, that makes everybody better. You know?
And makes
everybody's lives easier. I think if we can do that, um, then, then we
really

will build a more equitable and inclusive, uh, society. [Narelle] And better usable

digital communication. -[Emma] Absolutely.

-[Narelle] Because we can tell you what we need. [Emma] Yes, yes. Yeah, and don't be afraid.

That's the other thing. You know, I know that people have a lot of fear. I've actually done a, a TED talk on this topic, but I think it's important to let go of that fear, because, you know, we're just human. Like, like you. And most of us are really understanding when you screw up, right? We're not, we're not horrible. Most of us are not horrible, mean, nasty people who are trying to catch you in a trap. We really want to help people make it, make the situation better, and make communication more accessible. So, you know, so try and try not to be afraid to come and have those conversations with us. Because I think that's really important. [Narelle] Thanks, Emma. Thanks for being on the show. How can people contact you to keep discussing? [Emma] Absolutely keen to have, to keep the discussion going. Thank you for the opportunity, Narelle. I appreciate it. People can contact me. I'm on LinkedIn. I'm on, you know, Facebook. And, you know, also happy for, for people to, um, you know, send me an email on LinkedIn or whatever you, whatever you want to do. And more than happy to be, be in contact. [Narelle] Thanks, Emma. So that's another episode of The Digital Access Show. If you like what we do, please like, subscribe, review. If there's people out

there that you think, oh, Narelle needs to have a chat

with them, please let us know. We're always looking for people that are as passionate

about digital accessibility and opening up communication

to everyone as us. Because it's going to make

a better society for everyone. So we will see you next time.

Have a good week. [outro music]