



Disabling the Disability Mindset

In my earlier blog *Disability – by Design*, I pointed out that disability used to be understood in fairly narrow terms. It generally was seen as the shortcoming of the person who happened to have a particular functional limitation.

The emerging view is quite different. Disability is now understood as the result of how well (or not) society accommodates impairment or limitations in function. The blog noted that when environments adapt to individual need, the effects of a disability can change in severity – or even disappear altogether.

This view basically sees disability as the result of perception and procedure.

Disability is the result of *perception* in that attitudinal barriers prejudge what a given individual is able to do. Unfortunately, the perception is often far from reality.

Disability is also the result of *procedure*. The way in which we design communities and organize processes end up keeping many people with disabilities on the outside.

Not any more.

At least, that's the message from the Ontario government. It enacted the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*. The Act was passed in 2005 but its obligations are now coming into effect.

Required actions under the Act are *obligatory* for all governments, businesses and not-for-profit agencies in Ontario that employ one or more person. The required actions are *exemplary* for all organizations in the other provinces and territories.

That means you.

If you live in Ontario and you work in an organization with one or more employee, then you must take action. If you live outside Ontario, this message is equally important. You can be a powerful emissary for change in your community.

Starting January 1, 2012, accessible customer service came into effect for all Ontario businesses and organizations *with one or more employee*. By that time, you need to create (*read: you should have created*) a plan on accessible customer service and to train all staff. Your plan should:

- consider a person's disability when communicating with him or her
- allow assistive devices such as wheelchairs, walkers and oxygen tanks
- permit service animals
- welcome support persons
- let customers know when accessible services are not available
- invite customers to provide feedback.

You may want to check out the website of the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. Its section on the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* has an online training program which all staff based in Ontario are required to take (www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/serve-ability/index.aspx).

It might even be interesting to make this training into an activity that community members can do together. The compulsory online course can be turned into an open session involving local residents.

A public process would both raise awareness and allow for learning and strategic planning. It would identify the local actions that can be taken to break down attitudinal and physical barriers to participation.

Through their conversations, residents and groups can develop a plan that will help disable the disability mindset – and create a welcoming community for all.

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