

Webcast transcript: Accessible Ontario: Providing accessible customer service for January 1, 2012 - Part 1

Part 1 of our webcast talks about the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 and what it means to provide accessible customer service. You'll also learn about disabilities and barriers to accessibility.

Part 1 Video Link:

<http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/en/mcass/programs/accessibility/customerService/>

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT – Part 2

Linda Markowsky: Hi, I'm Linda Markowsky and I'll be your host for this webcast. Today, we're going to be talking about providing accessible customer service in businesses like yours and in organizations across Ontario.

Accessible customer service is part of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act or AODA. It allows the Province to develop accessibility standards that will remove barriers for people with disabilities and different abilities, making the province accessible by 2025. This is legislation that will open up your business to more customers, benefit all of us and make Ontario's communities stronger.

As a first step, all businesses in Ontario with at least one employee must offer accessible customer service by **January 1, 2012**. The good news is, it's easier than you might think.

To start off, I want to show you what we heard when we asked some people, "What does disability mean to you?" Let's watch.

Kulbinder Saran Caldwell: I've never tried to define disability for myself. It's one of those things that you know about its existence, you see individuals that have challenges but on a day to day basis you don't really think about it as part of your life until it becomes part of your reality.

Nicole Rioux: I like to put ability instead of disability. I like to say ok, I'm disabled but with lots of abilities.

Ron Lessard, Learning Disabilities Association of Sudbury: All disabilities, people with disabilities have challenges because they either have a physical or a mental function which isn't working just the way everybody else's works.

Astra Milberg: Do you know what a disability is?

Peter Oliver, Owner, Canadian Tire, Lakeshore and Leslie Toronto: My impression of a disability is someone who may just need a bit more time or assistance.

Jim Sanders, Past President, Canadian National Institute for the Blind: In my view, a disability is an artificially created circumstance. I'm totally blind, and yet for most of the time, I'm not disabled. For example when I'm sitting in a restaurant and somebody hands me a print menu which is usually what I get? I instantly become disabled. Some restaurants now carry a Braille menu, I'm no longer disabled.

Ben Shropshire: It's easy for me to go to school, to run up the stairs, to go down the hallway, to buy a coffee? all those little things, and for someone with a disability it's so much more than that.

Maya Jones: A disability is only a detour to where you want to get to.

Wilma Davies, Retired, Small Business Owner, Collingwood: And it doesn't necessarily mean somebody in a wheelchair. It could be intellectual, it could be vision, it could be hearing.

Catherine Sholtz, Accessibility Coordinator, Breaking Down Barriers: Invisible or visible. Sensory, mobility, intellectual or mental health. That would be my definition of disability.

Ron Lessard, Learning Disabilities Association of Sudbury: We're not talking about disabilities; we're talking about people with disabilities. So it's the person we're talking about.

Guidi Guron: I actually have never stopped myself since my disability of not going to a store, you know, women's clothing, or the restaurant just because they have a step because I feel that I want them to see me, how I had to get in there, because I obviously had to get help to just bump me up that one step.

Linda Markowsky: So, as you heard from our guests in the studio, there are different types of disabilities. Visible and invisible or hidden. Here are some types of disabilities:

- vision
- hearing
- physical
- intellectual
- developmental
- learning
- mental health
- speech or language
- deaf-blind.

It's also important to note that we're talking about disabilities that people may have for a short time, a long time or for their whole life.

Offering accessible customer service is not about the structure of your physical premises ? not about changing doors or adding elevators or ramps.

It's simply about understanding that customers with disabilities may have different needs and helping them can be as easy as asking one simple question: How can I help?

So you might be wondering:

- Where did this come from?
- What are barriers?
- Does this affect my business?
- What do I need to do?
- How do I get started?
- Who can I talk to if I have questions?

We're going to answer all these questions, provide you with lots of useful examples and point you to some free online tools.

First, let's start with some background so you can understand where 'Accessible Customer Service' came from.

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA) became law on June 13, 2005. The purpose of this landmark legislation, is to benefit all people in Ontario by developing mandatory accessibility standards that will identify, remove and prevent barriers for people with disabilities in key areas of daily living.

The standards were developed through an inclusive, consensus-based approach by involving:

- people with disabilities
- representatives of business, industries and the non-profit sector
- municipalities and other public sector organizations.

These standards will be implemented in stages?phased in over time. We are being realistic and allowing organizations flexibility to meet the requirements because we want accessibility to succeed.

Accessibility standards have been completed or are being developed in the following key areas:

- Customer Service
- Employment
- Information and Communications
- Transportation
- Built Environment.

The Accessible Customer Service standard was the first to be completed and that's what we're going to focus on today.

Standards for Employment, Information and Communications and Transportation are next and they are being integrated into one regulation to make it easier for businesses to comply.

The Built Environment standard is the last to be drafted and the government is working to integrate it with the building code and the other accessibility standards.

To be clear, only the standard for Accessible Customer Service is complete. These other standards are still being developed.

Once the other standards are final, we'll let you know and help you with tools and information so you can be prepared to comply with these standards.

Now, let's talk a bit about barriers. The standards being developed will remove barriers for people with disabilities and different abilities.

We often think of a barrier as something we can see ? like stairs. But barriers, like disabilities, can also be invisible such as attitudes and stereotypes. When you think about making your organization accessible it is important to be alert to both visible and hidden barriers.

Let's go back to our friends in the studio and ask them what it means to remove barriers.

Alf Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: So what make a person's life inclusive?

Jim Sanders, Past President, Canadian National Institute for the Blind: Well, I've always known that the greatest barrier that people who are blind or others that are labelled as disabled face is not the physical inability it's the attitude and perception of individuals, others, and society; but perhaps equally as important the attitude and perception that we have of ourselves.

Guidi Guron: My life changed in an instant. You know I was injured in a motor vehicle accident 17 years ago and I think all my family and friends just did not know how to approach me actually and how to sort of handle it. And I think that what I found is that I was the one that was able to make them feel comfortable around me by sort of talking about myself.

Alf Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: So to make an accessible world for people, we have to start looking at communication.

Guidi Guron: I think it's usually the first few seconds is what it will take for the two people to be comfortable with each other and then it's great from there.

Wilma Davies, Retired, Small Business Owner, Collingwood: A lot of people feel that because I'm visually impaired that I can read Braille, and I don't read Braille. I need somebody to read the menu for me, and I like to be ? I would like them to ask me what I would like, I don't want them to ask somebody sitting next to me because I know what I like and what I don't like.

Maya Jones: A lot of people have this notion that since you can't see, it really doesn't matter if you have dark brown shoes or black shoes.

Alf Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: Often when we take down a barrier for one person, or help to take down a barrier for one person, we put up a barrier for another. Many times you'll hear people say, well he's blind, but he may not be blind, he may be a person with a visual impairment. He has different needs. People who are deaf have different needs than people who have hearing impairments.

Ben Shropshire: It's kind of absurd how little we know about people with disabilities, in comparison to the rest of the cultures and the rest of the different groups of people that we live amongst.

Alf Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: The first thing you have to do is look at yourself. That's where education starts. Government can tell you, other people can tell you, books can tell you, but until you sort of look at yourself and look at someone you know who has a disability, that's how you educate yourself.

Catherine Sholtz, Accessibility Coordinator, Breaking Down Barriers: If a person doesn't understand the disability, then they maybe don't know how to socially interact with the person with the disability.

Alfred Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: All Ontarians believe in accessibility and they believe it's the right thing to do. Accessibility is about social inclusion, for the world to be accessible; everybody has to be able to participate.

Jim Sanders, Past President, Canadian National Institute for the Blind: A fully accessible society is important for everyone, it will allow many of us to enjoy a quality of life that most others take for granted.

Alfred Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: It is about you and I and people who have disabilities being able to do the same things.

Linda Markowsky: So, a barrier is anything that keeps someone with a disability from working, playing, shopping, studying or getting around in our communities.

Architectural or structural barriers may result from the design of a building such as stairs, heavy doors or narrow doorways, the width of hallways and even room layout.

Information and communications barriers, including technology, can make it difficult for people to receive or convey information. Things like small print size, confusing design of printed materials and the use of language that is not clear or plain can all cause difficulty. Everyday tools like computers and telephones can present barriers but they can also remove them.

Attitude is perhaps the most difficult barrier to overcome. Some people worry that they could offend the individual with a disability by offering help so they ignore or avoid people with disabilities altogether. Others may discriminate because of stereotypes.

Systemic barriers can occur when attitudes are embedded in policies and procedures. These are any practices or rules that restrict people with disabilities ? for example, a no refund policy in a retail clothing store. People in wheelchairs or scooters, or people with anxiety disorders, frequently can't try things on in a change room so they must take the clothes home to try them on. But if they don't fit, and the store has a strict no refund policy, they can't return them.

To recap, a barrier keeps people from living their full life, from going to work, from play and from participating in their community. There are four types of barriers:

- architectural or structural
- information and communications, including technology
- attitude
- systemic.

Today, we're going to focus on how to provide customer service in a way that removes, or doesn't create barriers, for someone with a disability. To learn more about the current status of the other standards and how to recognize and remove barriers visit our website ontario.ca/AccessON.

We've talked about where the standards came from and what they are intended to do. Now, let's look at who has to provide accessible customer service. The Accessibility Standards for Customer Service affect companies or organizations that:

- provide goods or services either directly to the public or to other businesses or organizations, and
- have one or more employees in Ontario.

When we say one employee, that doesn't just mean full-time staff. Even if you just hire one person for the summer, you're included under the standard.

Manufacturers, wholesalers and construction companies are required to provide accessible service, even though they may not think of their clients as ?customers.? In fact, customers can include other businesses and organizations, governments or a very specific client group that you may serve like health care providers.

Not-for-profit organizations such as places of worship, community centres and outreach organizations are also included under this standard.

And public sector organizations are required to meet the requirements of the standard as well. Examples of these types of organizations include:

- municipalities
- universities and colleges
- hospitals, and
- school boards.

If you're not sure if your organization is affected, ask us. You can call us at the numbers on the screen.

Next, let's talk about exactly what the standard requires you to do.

Providing accessible customer service is easier than you might think.

Let's look at some examples.

Alfred Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: As a business, first of all you have to have policies and practices in place that recognize that you are taking accessibility seriously and that you are participating in breaking down barriers for people.

It means that you have to make your staff aware and that your staff has to be trained in how to serve people with disabilities and have an awareness of various disabilities.

Peter Oliver, Owner, Canadian Tire, Lakeshore and Leslie, Toronto: There are so many different aspects in running a retail store and I think the first and most important aspect is customer service. It starts with myself, being the owner of the store that when I am on the retail floor, that I ask customers how they are doing and if they are finding everything they need. It is important that our managers do the same thing and our floor staff do the same thing so it carries right through the whole organization.

Cheryl Blackman, Director of Visitor Experience, Royal Ontario Museum: Our designers wanted to hear first hand from the customer. They wanted to understand what it really takes to make an exhibit more accessible for someone who is blind or someone who is deaf or a person who has autism for example. We put together a committee of 10 people and all of these different disabilities are represented.

Peter Oliver, Owner, Canadian Tire, Lakeshore and Leslie, Toronto: I think a lot of people with disabilities want to feel independent and want to shop in a store that treats them like everyone else.

Victor Fiume, President, Canadian Home Builders Association: We try not to treat the person differently. We certainly have to treat your situation differently and make sure we can accommodate you.

Nicole Rioux: The accessibility in a store will influence a lot my family directly.

Peter Oliver, Owner, Canadian Tire, Lakeshore and Leslie, Toronto: It is of the utmost importance to have complete accessibility and it goes along with independence.

Nicole Rioux (speaking in French): Good Customer Service is like gold ... it's precious. It has such an effect on me that I will become a loyal customer.

Linda Markowsky: We've developed a compliance manual specifically for small business that has lots of practical examples and tips. It also provides more detail on the requirements that I'm going to go through now.

Part 2 of our webcast talks about the Accessible Customer Service Standard and the steps you need to do to be ready for January 1, 2012. Go to Part 2:
<http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/en/mcass/programs/accessibility/customerService/>