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Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN)

ACCAN Communications Consumer Congress

Wednesday, 13 September 2023

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ANDREW WILLIAMS: We are on the run to the finish line now. The next short presentation I would like to welcome ACCAN's Accessible Telecoms team, ably led by Dr Wayne Hawkins, who we have mentioned this morning. We have got Jennifer Parry and James O'Brien from the team. They will give a quick overview of our Accessible Telecoms program and then we will wrap up with a final presentation or panel session on regional coms. I will hand over to Wayne.

WAYNE HAWKINS: Good afternoon, everyone. As Andrew said, my name is Wayne. I am out of breath right now. The Accessible Telecoms is a service that ACCAN has been running for five years. We got an initial grant in 2018 from the National Disability Insurance Agency. The service offers a free, independent nation-wide information portal for people with disabilities and seniors to get information about the accessibility features of all the handsets available in the Australian market place and also tablets, there is a web site and free call 1800 number, email and SMS.

In 2021, 2022, we didn't have funding, but thankfully the industry stepped up and provided us with enough funding to maintain the service and then earlier this year we got a Commonwealth grant to run the service for the next two years, which has been really useful, because we have been able to grow the service and develop it, working on upgrading the web site and making it more - greater functionality and better usability for people who use it and a number of improvements to just grow the service. When we first started, the first month, our statistics were - we had almost 2,000 unique visits to the web site and we were very excited by that. It was much more than we expected. Currently we run month on month in excess of 10,000 unique visits to the web site and an average of 30-50 phone calls and emails from consumers, requesting information.

The information is provided in a really accessible and easy to understand format and a lot of the questions and the team, James and Jennifer will speak more about what that actually involves, but a lot of the questions that we get from people are very specific about things "How do I use the phone? How does it work? How can I set it up?" What we are looking at doing with the service, we have information about training opportunities across the nation where people can get more information for both online and in person and group training and how to use devices. We also have information about the National Relay Service for people who are interested in that? There is also a section which provides interesting current updates in communications and digital technology suitable for people with disabilities, as well as an area which lists a range of accessories that people need. If somebody who needs to have something to put their phone on, on their wheelchair where they can find that different services that people can use in order to be able to use the phone in the way that best suits them.

That is pretty much a nutshell of the service. It has proved to be really filling a gap in information, we're hoping to shortly add some more information. ACCAN did some in house - not from a grants project, but from our own research budget, around affordable devices and equipment that people can alternative places to get equipment. We are just going through the results of that, verifying and vetting the organisations that provide that, because one of the key things that Accessible Telecoms does to provide information that won't harm consumers. We don't recommend anything. We just provide the information and allow consumers to use that information to make the choice that best suits them. That will be a new addition of information that will be coming shortly when we finish the upgrade to the web site. I will hand over to James. James and Jennifer are the Accessible Telecoms team. Unfortunately, Elise who leads the

team is unwell and wasn't able to come today. James and Jennifer will give a little information about what kinds of calls they take, what kinds of responses that they have and the questions that people are asking.

Thanks, James.

JENNIFER PARRY: Good afternoon, everyone, thank you for taking the time to listen to the information about the Accessible Telecoms team. I would like to start by taking up a point that Wayne made about how the service really fills a gap. I joined ACCAN only a few months ago and, to be honest, I had little awareness of the Accessible Telecoms team for whatever reason. Since working in this space, I have really come to understand and value the power and impact that this service actually has in many ways, the main one is being able to connect people with the information that they're really looking for. In the complex world we live in, with things like the digital divide which has been mentioned a lot over the last two days, or information and formats which, for whatever reason, may not be understood or being able to be found by a person who really needs that information, there is stress or duress or needing it urgently, it is wonderful to be able to speak to someone or to answer an email to be able to cut through the complication and to give the person exactly the specific that's they are looking for in many cases. I can't tell you how satisfying that is and what direct meaning and impact that has, both to the person and for me, as someone being able to really make a difference at a personal level.

I particularly was innate with the service as a person with lived experience with disability and it was actually one of the key reasons, apart from telecommunications experience, I actually applied for the project officer role I am in now existing to run this very service. A chance to really help people directly. So, for example, there are many different

types of inquiries. One example is, it was only yesterday where a person was trying to find out what they could use with an iPhone to be able to either track the phone itself, or to track other things linked with the phone, whether it be putting something in a bag to use the iPhone find me app to track a bag, for example. It was wonderful to be able to say "There is the options that are available", like air tags or tiles or other things that connect with Bluetooth and to able to give that information so a person can make a fully informed decision.

Often when that occurs, a person is really appreciative because they are appreciative of our time, they are appreciative of the information but, more importantly than that, they actually appreciate that there is somewhere that actually cares and has time to assist and can add a human element, in addition to other industry processes and centres, something that can be a bit independent as well, and that form of feedback comes through over and over again with every single interaction and communication with a consumer.

I applaud the fact that this team exists and that it has been funded for another two years. I would say to industry to continue to support and work with and collaborate with services like this so that information can be shared and be in a really timely, useful manner to the people that it will impact most in every aspect of telecommunications, whether it be about phones available, trying to find a device, where to find in person training. That is another important one where people can not access things digitally or prefer to use that channel of information, or it's a human process instead. I think if this continues and ACCAN and the Accessible Telecoms team within that can continue to collaborate, this gap will be filled more and more and become far more effective and powerful to really reach more people who are often isolated, disenchanting or just lost with how and where to go for certain issues.

The Accessible Telecoms team being part of ACCAN, when I think of that, I think ACCAN Accessible Telecoms, yes, we can! Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

JAMES O'BRIEN: Thanks, Jen. I would like to say that, unlike Luke Coleman, this is a blatant sales pitch. You, as industry, play a key role in promoting this service, so please do. Thank you. (APPLAUSE)

WAYNE HAWKINS: Just to wrap up, I know it is afternoon teatime, there is the Accessible Telecoms, we have a table out front with brochures and if anyone wants to see how the service actually works, there is a laptop there, we can walk you through that, show you how it works. If you have any more questions, certainly talk to us during the rest of the day. It's a great service. We're really grateful to the department and to the minister for seeing the value in this and providing the funds to keep it going for the next two years. We will be doing some extensive reporting back on how the service is being used, so it will be clear to see that it is value for money from the grant that we have been provided and I encourage everybody to have a look at it, see what the value is for your family, friends, people you know and spread the word and that this service is available. It's a free service and we're happy to take any questions or feedback during the rest of the afternoon. Thanks, very much.

(APPLAUSE)

ANDREW WILLIAMS: Thank you, very much to Wayne and the team. As Wayne alluded to, it is now time for a quick afternoon tea break. If we can be back here by 3 o'clock for our final panel on regional coms? Give us a chance to set up and we will bring it home. Thanks again to the team.

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