NDIS New World Conference October 27 2015

Introduction

Good afternoon.

Thank you to the organisers for the opportunity to participate. It's exciting to be at such a significant event discussing the potential of accessible ICT for Disability in the 21st century.

I would also like to acknowledge the other panellists – I've worked closely with both Scott and James over the past few years in our efforts to make sure that the potential of information and communications technology is realised to empower the lives of people with disability.

Just a little background - ACCAN is the Australian Communications Consumer Action network, the representative voice for consumers in the Australian telecommunications sector. My role with ACCAN is Disability Policy Advisor.

While accessible ICT is one of ACCAN's priority areas of work, we also are engaged in promoting access to telephony, broadband, broadcasting and converged media for people with disability.

What I want to talk about today is why accessible ICT? Why is it important? Why should we bother? And then a little about how Standards can help to achieve universal accessibility.

Firstly, there are a number of obligations. While these are an important aspect in answering the Why accessible ICT question, I don't think they are the answer to that question you are looking for. I will come to that.

Australia has a number of instruments, both domestic and international which lay out requirements for accessible ICT. We have the UNCRPD.

There are a number of Articles in the convention which speak to accessibility of ICT but I think the most relevant is Article 9 Accessibility, which calls on states parties to ensure that people with disability have equal access to

Information and communication technologies

There is also the National Disability Strategy which provides guidance in implementing accessibility for people with disability.

Specifically in Policy Direction 5 - Communication and information systems that are accessible, reliable and responsive to the needs of people with disability, their families and carers.

And then there is the Disability Discrimination Act which prohibits discrimination against people with disability. These are all instruments designed to increase participation by people with disability with specific reference to accessible information and communications technologies.

Why is accessible ICT important?

We all know that the NDIS is disrupting disability services in Australia and as we see from the conference theme the NDIS is undoubtedly bringing disability into the 21st century.

Every part of our lives is now connected to technology. As we have heard already this technology has the potential to not only disrupt disability but to fundamentally change what it means to be a person with disability in Australia. However, this potential only exists if the technology is accessible and usable by people with different abilities. And in this increasingly digitally connected society it is paramount that people with disability do not get left behind.

We are all familiar with the term digital divide – something very relevant in Australia with our vast areas sparsely populated but still in need of connection to the networks of telephony and broadband.

What we are not so familiar with is the disability digital divide, not a question of having access to the network, but a question of having the right technology in order to connect to the network.

The nbn is predicted to bridge the digital divide for all Australians, but if you are a person with disability and do not have the right technology to access the network having a high-speed broadband fibre cable connected to your premises will be of no use to you.

The nbn will provide thousands of Australians the opportunity to telecommute. This is a potential game changer for many people with disability particularly those who are unable to leave their home. But if the network, software or device is inaccessible or anyone of these is incompatible with another then the game is over.

So how do we get to accessible ICT?

The seven principles of Universal Design give us the starting point to understand what accessible ICT should do.

1. Equitable use
2. Flexibility in use
3. Simple and intuitive use
4. Perceptible information
5. Tolerance for error
6. Low physical effort
7. Size and space for approach and use

Implementing these seven principles allow technology to be designed for all. ICT designed for all allows for the widest number of people to use the technology.

So whose role is it to design for all in ICT?

We all need to play our part to ensure that new and emerging technologies are accessible, usable and designed for all.

Industry, designers, procurers, users, people with disability, government and standards bodies all play a role in how new technology evolves. It is not just one individual or link in the product development chain that is responsible.

People with disability need to be consulted and have a say in how they want to use technology.

Procurers such as service providers, government agencies and businesses have a role in stipulating that the technology they purchase can meet the needs of all their respective end-users, not only those who are without impairment.

Designers and developers need to be thinking about how people with different abilities will use their technology - taking us back to the principles of Universal Design.

When we have this eco-system as the foundation of ICT design and innovation we will have accessible ICT. The will be no more expensive retro – fitting of inaccessible equipment; no more complicated work around to accommodate those people who are unable to use new technologies; no more duplication of expensive devices with custom features because Universal Design was not part of the development process; no more litigation because badly designed technology excluded people with disability. And most importantly no more disability digital divide caused by inaccessible ICT products and services.

As we have heard from the other speakers the transformative potential of accessible ICT offers us all previously unimagined possibilities.

For those of us with disability those possibilities are life changing. Without accessible ICT I would not be talking to you today. And this is just the beginning.

The future is going to be even more empowering for people with disability if we get the accessibility right.

The Internet of Things

We hear a lot of talk of the internet of Things where everything is connected.

With the Internet of Things becoming more and more of a daily reality people with disability will have greater independence, access to information and services and be able to have the kind of economic, social and cultural participation that most Australians take for granted.

The Internet of Things will also provide great opportunities for service providers to engage directly with clients in their homes. Accessible information and communications technologies coupled with ubiquitous high-speed broadband will allow for services to be delivered to clients anywhere.

So while the NDIS is undoubtedly disrupting the status-quo of disability services and care the convergence of accessible ICT, ubiquitous high-speed broadband and the new paradigm of client choice will provide many opportunities for service providers to deliver high quality empowering services to their clients with disability.

Additionally those service providers who adopt universal accessibility into their process and systems will not only be able to provide clients with the technologies they need but will also become workplaces suitable for people with disability.

In order to harness these opportunities it is essential that service providers engage with accessible ICT. Streamlining ICT processes and services delivery will require accessible and usable ICT products.

We just heard Scott talk about the importance of accessible web and online interfaces. And we heard Jim talk about how Microsoft is implementing accessibility into the engineering of their products.

Clearly there are already many accessible products and services available. One of the key enablers in facilitating this change to Universal ICT accessibility is relevant standards.

Scott has just spoken about the web accessibility standards developed by W3C and now an international ISO standard and as we heard from James there is a strong international move to progress international standards for public procurement of accessible ICT.

ACCAN has been participating in this push with a particular focus for the adoption of a whole of government public procurement policy for accessible ICT here in Australia.

Probably the first person to put this on the agenda here in Australia was Gunela Astbrink, who is here today and who has worked tirelessly for many years promoting the adoption of a public procurement policy for accessible ICT.

Gunela and Dr Will Tibbin's 2011 research, funded by ACCAN, has been instrumental in keeping this issue on the political agenda.

ACCAN is currently discussing how we can adopt the European Standard for procurement of accessible ICT here as an Australian Standard.

Having an Australian standard which mirrors an international standard will make the adoption of procurement straightforward, increase economic, social and community participation for people with disability and will also provide industry a benchmark for accessible ICT products and services that can then encourage innovation in accessibility as a product differentiator.

Having a standard with universal accessibility benchmarks for ICT will not only make procurement easier, it will also ensure that those organisations – be they governments, corporations or NGOs - will be providing access to all Australians including those with disability.

So as we spend the next couple of days discussing the potential of ICT to bring disability into the 21st century, we need to understand that this is only possible when all the ICT we use is accessible so that the true potential for those of us with disabilities can be realised.

Thank you.