

POLITICS AS USUAL: Accessibility?

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Most of us don't think about it on a daily basis as we are now accustomed to it, but it wasn't long ago that many businesses, doctors' offices ? even the public bus ? were inaccessible to people with mobility or accessibility issues.

Think about your high school and then think about your kids' high school and see how far we have come in accepting, and even expecting accommodation, as normal. Now we assume that there will be parking for the disabled, bathrooms equipped to accommodate a wheelchair or a ramp to allow folks with mobility or other physical challenges to enter a restaurant, library or Starbucks to get a coffee.

And, for those that don't accept it, there is legislation to make them accept it.

In Ontario, ?businesses, public sector organizations, municipalities, educational institutions, producers of educational materials (such as text books) and Library boards are required to be AODA compliant by the end of this decade.?

That means they must meet at least a minimum standard of accessibility for all users. It's not just about making a building ?accessible? ? putting in a ramp, widening doors, including at least one bathroom per floor for the physically challenged ? it is about making websites accessible for the visually or aurally challenged.

It's about provisions to ensure those across the broad spectrum of accessibility needs can access facilities and services with no impediments.

But, is that where accessibility stops? Putting in a ramp and patting yourself on the back about how ?inclusive? you are? What about those folks who are challenged by other issues, not necessarily physical? What about folks who have ?invisible? disabilities? What accommodations ? if any ? are made for them?

Much like other rights based legislation; it takes time for a culture to be inculcated with a new norm. And it is clear that we still have quite a ways to go. A recent event with a good family friend and their daughter's painful odyssey toward gainful employment makes that patently clear.

You can have all the legislation in the world, enforce changes to enable folks to access all manner of things, but how do you legislate fairness? How do you ensure that everyone ? regardless of their abilities ? has equal access to every aspect of modern life ? including employment?

Yes, yes, it is wonderful that folks in a wheelchair can now go to a restaurant and eat just like everyone else, but if they can't get a job to pay for that meal, what the hell is the point?

You don't have a right to a job, that's true, but what you do have a right to is the opportunity to try to get a job, based on your abilities. If you can do the job, it shouldn't matter if you have cognitive challenges, or physical challenges. According to the law, it's not supposed to matter.

Think about it this way: would you work for a company that would not hire people of colour because they didn't ?think? they could do the job, or frequent a restaurant that did not hire female chefs because they didn't ?think? they could handle the job? Or frequent a business that would not hire seniors because they didn't ?think? they could handle the job? I dare say your answer would be no to all of the above.

It's not about quotas. It's not about tokenism. It's about giving folks a chance to contribute in whatever way they can.

At least give them a shot. They have a right to surprise you.