



REGIONAL MODEL OF PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUTREACH:

United Way AODA Enabling Change Project

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OUTLINE

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Executive Summary

The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) Project was led by United Way Ottawa, in partnership with and funded by, the Government of Ontario. The project ran between October 2016 and October 2017 and its key objectives were two-fold: to educate and inform businesses in Ottawa, and in Lanark and Renfrew Counties about the AODA and its compliance requirements; and to create and pilot a regional public education and outreach model that could be scaled province-wide, particularly in regions where there is an urban hub and surrounding rural areas.

As this report will demonstrate, the AODA project was successful in meeting, and in many cases surpassing, its objectives. For example, one goal was to outreach to, educate and inform a total of 3000 small and medium sized businesses on the AODA and compliance requirements. By the project's conclusion, 3734 had been reached. Similarly, targets for knowledge increases were set. Over the course of the project, the goal was to see an 80% increase in knowledge post-engagement on 2 out of 4 measures. Post engagement surveys revealed that these objectives were not only met but also exceeded. For example, 91.25% of survey respondents reported an increase in their knowledge of the AODA standards and compliance requirements.

These positive outreach and education results provide a great deal of confidence in the model devised. Additionally, they provide a rich source of learning about the conditions required to execute an effective engagement strategy over a large and diverse geographical area within the province, particularly among stakeholders for whom there is no established or consistent mechanism for communication and knowledge sharing. Based on the experience of this project, the United Way Ottawa asserts that the following conditions are essential achievement factors:

- **An organization prepared to play the role of “backbone”** - A project of this magnitude, spread over a wide geographical area and engaging a large number of stakeholders benefits from an entity that has the capacity and resources to plan, manage, and support the initiative through “ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling

the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly”. (Kania, John & Kramer, Mark, Winter 2011).

- **Clear objectives, communicated well.** In the case of this AODA outreach and education project, the goals and outcomes were established by the province in collaboration with United Way Ottawa. They were measurable and calibrated to a determined time frame. This allowed for clear expectations to be set and for all project partners to be integrated and aligned toward success.
- **Reinforcing activities.** On its own, the AODA project may have been limited to informing employers about legislation and compliance. When aligned with the Employment Accessibility Resource Network (EARN), there was a reinforcing message of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, creating accessible workplaces and supporting employers in accessing a still largely untapped talent pool. Equally important, the United Ways in Ottawa, and Renfrew and Lanark Counties had strong established relationships with both business and community agencies and therefore the project benefited from not only existing knowledge and networks but a level of trust. In instances where this foundation was less strong, the project did not proceed.
- **Planning, communication and adaptive learning –** The development of a common delivery model, messages, and materials was essential to the consistency of the education component of this project. The success of the outreach was highly dependent on an iterative learning process. Facilitated by regular and structured communication, project partners were able to adjust and customize the model, messages and materials to meet the unique needs of small and medium sized business owners, as well as accommodate the significant differences that exist between rural and urban communities.

While AODA legislation makes it mandatory for all organizations with one or more employees in Ontario to train its staff, volunteers, and board members on all five AODA standards, the true purpose and goal of the AODA is to facilitate a fully inclusive society where all citizens have an equal opportunity to succeed. Overall, the outcomes of this AODA project underscore the importance of issue-based and community level knowledge, partnerships and networks. It is these factors that will enable the principles upon which the AODA was created to be sustained long-past compliance deadlines.

Introduction

Description of the project

The purpose of United Way's AODA pilot project was two-fold. First, it was to educate and inform businesses in Ottawa, and in Lanark and Renfrew Counties about the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA), specifically the accessibility standards and compliance requirements. The *Act* currently has five standards in effect: Customer Service; Information and Communication; Employment; Transportation; and Design of Public Spaces. Compliance reporting is required for those businesses with 20 or more employees. The second goal of the project was to create a Public Education and Outreach Regional Model (i.e. this model) which could be replicated in other regions of the province where there is an urban hub with smaller communities and rural areas surrounding it.

The benefits of hiring persons with disabilities, and the resources available to employers through the Employment Accessibility Resource Network (EARN) were also promoted during the project. The EARN network is a community initiative, led by United Way Centraide Ottawa. We build partnerships across communities to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities, and our mission is to support our network to empower people with disabilities to fully participate in the labour market. Accordingly, the Employment Standard was highlighted in conversations with businesses.

Further, United Ways are organizations that invest in their communities to improve lives through engaging individuals and mobilizing collective action. United Ways took part in this project in an effort to work towards an inclusive, barrier free and accessible community.

The project was delivered by outreach coordinators to businesses through multiple channels and by collaborating with business associations, umbrella organizations, networks, community partners, and sector tables to achieve project goals.

Target audience

The target audience for the project was small and medium sized businesses, i.e. those with one or more employees and less than 500 employees, and businesses located in Ottawa and surrounding areas, as

well as in Lanark and Renfrew Counties (see page 12 for area descriptions).

Outline of project performance measures and targets

The performance measures for the project were as follows:

1. To educate and inform 2,400 organizations;
2. To educate and inform 3,000 participants i.e. employees/managers/owners of the small and medium sized businesses;
3. To reach the target of 80 % of those who completed pre and post engagement surveys increasing their knowledge of the following:
 - a. barriers to employment faced by persons with disabilities
 - b. AODA accessibility standards and compliance requirements
4. To reach the target of 80 % of those who completed pre and post engagement surveys:
 - a. agreeing to recommend the resources provided to employers in their networks (Y/N response)
 - b. agreeing to incorporate at least 2 learnings within 3 months (Y/N response)
5. To document the number of hits to the AODA pages on the EARN website;
6. To increase membership within EARN (a goal of 60 new members); and
7. To complete an adaptive regional model.

Timeline

The AODA project was launched in October 2016 with a completion date of October 2017.

Overview of the AODA Project

United Way roles and responsibilities

United Way Centraide Ottawa

The United Way Centraide Ottawa's primary role was to give backbone support to the AODA initiative. Backbone support included human resources (e.g. recruitment, offer letters, payroll), and IT services provided to outreach coordinators working out of Ottawa and to partner United Ways in Lanark and Renfrew Counties. For example, all members of the AODA project team had access to the United Way Centraide Ottawa's shared computer drive and IT technology supports, regardless of location. With respect to responsibilities, the Director of Community Initiatives was the overall lead for the team.

The Project Officer, located at United Way Centraide Ottawa, was responsible for developing educational materials, a power point for presentations, a pre and post engagement evaluation survey, a weekly report template, facilitating weekly reporting conference calls, and completing reports to the funder. The Project Officer was also able to leverage the support of colleagues in the Marketing and Communications Department at United Way Centraide Ottawa to create a web presence for the project via AODA pages on the EARN website and a Communications Plan. The United Way Centraide Ottawa team also led discussions on catchment areas for the 3 locations, strategic outreach efforts, and managed the budget.

However, the outreach coordinators and the regional directors from the partner United Ways in Lanark and Renfrew Counties provided valuable insights and input throughout the project to ensure a collaborative process between all partners.

United Way Lanark County and Renfrew County United Way

United Ways participated in the AODA project as equal partners. Regional directors in Lanark and in Renfrew Counties provided local orientation and onboarding for outreach coordinators hired for the roles in their counties. On a day-to-day basis the regional directors provided supervision and guidance to the outreach coordinators. The responsibility of the partner United Ways in Lanark and Renfrew Counties was also to play an active

role in contributing to project outcomes, and to bring a rural lens to the task of educating small and medium sized businesses and creating this Model.

This pilot was the very first joint project of the United Ways in Ottawa, and Lanark and Renfrew Counties. These three United Ways officially amalgamated on April 1, 2017, half-way through the pilot. It was therefore a valuable exercise for United Way Centraide Ottawa to learn how to work with its new regional partners as the project was rolled out in all three locations.

Catchment areas

The catchment areas for the project were the City of Ottawa and surrounding areas, Lanark County and Smiths Falls, and the County of Renfrew and the City of Pembroke. The table that follows provides data on the square miles and the population of these three areas, based on 2015 data (Source: ESRI Geoenrichment Services).

Attribute	Full Region	Renfrew	Lanark	Ottawa
Area in Square Miles	5,552.99	3,202.16	1,234.22	1,116.62
2015 population	1,128,268	108,103	66,566	953,599

To view a regional map, please see Appendix B.

What is worthwhile to note is that while Ottawa has the smallest geographic footprint it has the largest population; accordingly Ottawa was resourced with two full-time outreach coordinators, and Lanark and Renfrew each had one outreach coordinator.

More specifically, the City of Ottawa was divided into two areas for outreach. These were Central and Western Ottawa comprising key neighborhoods such as Centretown, Downtown, The Glebe, Byward Market, Sandy Hill, Lowertown and in the west end Westboro, Nepean, and Hampton Park. The second outreach area was Ottawa East and South

comprising the large neighborhood of Orleans, St. Laurent, old Ottawa South, Cumberland, Gloucester, and the outlying areas of Grenville and Manotick.

The foregoing is not meant to be a complete list of Ottawa's neighborhoods; it was not possible to cover the City of Ottawa with the human resources and time available to implement the project. Outreach coordinators visited as many businesses as possible during the project timelines.

Lanark County comprises Carleton Place and Smiths Falls and neighboring areas, principally Perth, Mississippi Mills, and Beckwith. In the County of Renfrew the key areas were the City of Pembroke, the town of Renfrew and communities such as Deep River, Arnprior, Petawawa and Killaloe. The same caveat about coverage holds true for these small communities and rural areas as for the City of Ottawa.

The outreach coordinators focused their outreach into neighborhoods and communities in their catchment areas where there was a concentration of small and medium sized businesses, where there were United Way connections, and personal contacts from their own networks. Invitations to present that came from chambers of commerce, BIAs, community organizations, special events (e.g. golf tournaments), town council and accessibility committee meetings, and available venues to hold information sessions also had an impact on where outreach was conducted within the catchment areas listed above.

Outcomes for performance measures and targets

Outreach to a participant was defined as a contact arising from a walk-in, a meeting, a presentation, a visit to a booth, and/or attendance at an information session. Each participant was counted only once to prevent duplication of data.

Number of participants reached

The goal of the project was to educate and inform **3,000** small and medium sized businesses. The term participant refers to an employee, a hiring manager and/or business owner. This performance measure was

successfully surpassed: Outreach coordinators reached **3,734** participants thus achieving **124%** of the project goal.

Number of organizations reached

The goal of the project was to educate and inform **2,400** organizations. This number was smaller because an outreach coordinator could have contact with more than 1 participant from the same business. The term organization refers to small and medium sized businesses and it can also include non-profits. Actual outcomes were that the outreach coordinators reached **2,412** organizations demonstrating that this performance measure was achieved at **100.5%** of the target.

Knowledge increase & accessibility learnings (i.e. survey results)

With respect to an increase in knowledge and accessibility learnings, performance measures were evaluated through a pre and post engagement survey. Over the course of the project 190 surveys were completed by participants, primarily after one-on-one meetings and information sessions had occurred. The target for all measures was an 80% increase in knowledge post engagement, and this target was exceeded for 3 out of 4 measures, demonstrating the effectiveness of receiving information about the AODA and accessibility for those individuals who completed surveys.

Here are the results:

- **78.3%** of participants increased their knowledge of the barriers to employment faced by persons with disabilities;
- To note: many participants indicated that their knowledge of barriers to employment was already good to excellent prior to receiving knowledge and this factor may account for this result being just under the target;
- **91.25%** of participants increased their knowledge of the AODA accessibility standards and compliance requirements;
- **96.2%** participants agreed to recommend the resources provided to employers in their networks; and

- **91.7%** of participants agreed to incorporate at least 2 learnings within 3 months.

Increased compliance, awareness and collaboration

The focus of the AODA project was on informing and educating participants rather than on compliance. Therefore, the impact of these outreach efforts on rates of compliance reporting cannot be ascertained from this project's outcomes.

However, the importance of compliance was highlighted to participants in several ways. Here are the methods we employed:

- Including information in AODA educational materials given to participants;
- Including slides in the Power Point delivered during information sessions;
- Informing participants during one-on-one meetings and presentations, and
- Informing readers, specifically about compliance requirements, in 3 editions of EARN's monthly e-newsletter.

It is to be hoped that increased awareness of the AODA, the Employment Standard and of accessibility issues generally came about as a result of project outreach; the survey results certainly speak to an increase in awareness.

Collaboration between the United Ways naturally occurred due to project activities through working together to achieve a common goal.

Communications, Marketing and Promotion

Employment Accessibility Resource Network (EARN)

EARN's mandate is to build partnerships across communities to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities. EARN provides a coordinated access point for education and expertise on employment, accessibility and workplace inclusion for people with disabilities and employers. EARN achieves this mandate through activities such as: learning and networking events; customized recruitment activities; an annual conference, a monthly e-newsletter; and access to experts and support. EARN is therefore ideally situated to promote the accessibility message of the AODA and the Employment Standard, and to provide support to small and medium businesses to empower them to be more inclusive workplaces that welcome persons with disabilities into their workforces. This was how EARN was communicated as a resource to the target audience. As a result of the project there were 45 new EARN memberships which occurred within all three United Ways.

Communications Plan

A communications plan was created with the following in mind: educate small and medium-sized businesses about the province's AODA with a focus on employment standards requirements; raise awareness of the benefits and economic value of hiring people with disabilities; reinforce EARN's role in finding employment for people with disabilities; and increased community-wide collaboration between employers, service providers, funders and other stakeholders.

The plan included promotions through the web and social media (LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook), print media (dependent on pick-up); and by creating a package of shareable resources for employers to encourage them to learn more about the AODA, the benefits of attending an information training session, and passing on information on the AODA through their own networks.

Educational materials

A package of shareable educational materials was created. The primary focus was to educate businesses about the AODA, then pivot to the value proposition of EARN, and then to the value that United Ways bring to their local communities.

Educational materials consisted of the following items:

AODA project:

1. Catalogue of Ontario Accessibility Resources (Accessibility Directorate of Ontario resource);
2. AODA / EARN One Pager
3. *Getting Started* document with information about the project, the role of EARN, key points on the five accessibility standards with links to Accessibility Directorate of Ontario (ADO) resources and compliance requirements, definition of what is a disability, resources, tips and links on creating an accessible workplace, ADO contacts, funding sources and contact information for outreach coordinators;
4. Employment Standards One Pager; and
5. Power Point with notes for presentations / information sessions

EARN:

1. Overview of EARN;
2. Benefits for employers;
3. Application form; and
4. Guiding principles document to be signed by every EARN member & which endorses accessible and inclusive hiring and workplace practices

Partner United Ways

All relevant documents created through the project, excluding ADO resources, were customized for each United Way to increase local buy-in.

United Ways used a customized folder to identify it in the community, and what information or resources to include in it about individual United Ways was decided at the local level.

Newsletter

EARN has a monthly e-newsletter that is distributed to a 90+ membership and then posted on the EARN website. We created an AODA Update, featuring local project impacts that was published in 11 editions of the newsletter. A “Did You Know” column was later added to further inform readers. We will continue to provide information on the AODA in the newsletter on an ongoing basis demonstrating our commitment to the accessibility agenda.

News media and social media coverage

Social media approaches were used at all pilot sites. United Way Centraide Ottawa posted a blog on the value of training through attending the information sessions on its main site. Facebook coverage was most successful in Lanark County through relationships with chambers of commerce and BIAs. Success with print and online media occurred in Renfrew where two local papers published stories on the AODA project (Eganville Leader, Pembroke Observer).

Website hits

We created AODA pages on EARN’s website and were therefore able to drive traffic to find out more about the project and information sessions; in a little over six months there were 400 hits to the AODA pages.

Development of the Regional Model

The model was developed through gathering information from the weekly reporting conversations, the weekly reports, a tracker to capture organization names, survey results, contributions from outreach coordinators, regional directors in Lanark and Renfrew, and support from United Way Centraide Ottawa's Director of Community Initiatives, the Senior Advisor, Public Affairs and the Marketing and Communications Department in Ottawa.

Lay the foundation

To prepare the outreach coordinators for their roles as educators in their respective communities, we believed it was important to lay a solid foundation of knowledge around the AODA and project focus.

Know your subject area

To ensure a solid foundation, outreach coordinators had several opportunities through different methods of learning to gain the required knowledge to perform their role of educating small and medium sized businesses. These were the opportunities provided:

1. Initial training on the AODA and compliance requirements was delivered by an ADO staff member;
2. Time was allocated during the first two weeks for the outreach coordinators to become familiar with ADO resources (each coordinator was given a USB of resources and tools after the training session);
3. Educational materials and a Power Point were developed based on ADO resources, tailored to meet the needs of our target audience. The outreach coordinators had opportunities to provide feedback on these resources thereby further engaging them in the learning process;
4. A Discovery Conversation tool was created by one of the Ottawa outreach coordinators which outlined in detail how a conversation with a business could occur during an initial meeting or walk-in and it provided examples on how to respond to employer

questions/concerns about the AODA, how to pivot to EARN and the value that United Ways bring to the community; and

5. A weekly reporting conference call was held from project inception, and this afforded many opportunities for information sharing and problem-solving, and thereby increase knowledge and expertise in conversations with businesses.

Know your neighborhood & local issues

Each of the outreach coordinators was hired based on their knowledge of the local neighborhoods where they were going to conduct outreach. The regional directors in the United Ways located outside Ottawa were also valuable sources of local knowledge, as was the Director of Community Initiatives for the United Way Centraide Ottawa. These various connections proved essential to project success because it meant that each coordinator could start with warm leads to businesses and organizations in their respective communities.

Here are three examples of how knowing your neighborhood & local issues benefited each partner.

In **Ottawa East** the Outreach Coordinator visited a small pizzeria she knew well from childhood visits with her family. This familiarity made it possible for her to engage the owner of this small business in productive conversation about the AODA; it is possible that he may not have made time to talk to someone whom he did not know. During these conversations she found out that he was active in his community and that in the past he had had a partnership with a local school to give placement and training opportunities to youth with intellectual and other disabilities to learn basic culinary skills. He also indicated that he was willing to hire persons with disabilities in his business. These conversations led him to join the EARN network a short time after her visit.

In **Renfrew County** the Outreach Coordinator reached out to the local Employment Ontario service provider (Employment Networks) in the town of Renfrew, an organization whose clients include persons with disabilities. This was an organization with which she was already familiar. They agreed to host a Breakfast and Learn Information Session.

This event benefited both parties; it was an opportunity for Employment Networks to reach out to their employer partners to offer them a benefit of engagement (a free information session) and for the Outreach Coordinator to inform more small and medium businesses about the AODA. Employment Networks advertised the event on their website, and the Outreach Coordinator promoted the event through a local chamber of commerce and BIA. As a result 18 employers attended the session. The event resulted in a milestone: two applications were submitted to EARN, the first employers to apply to join the network outside Ottawa.

In rural communities many employers take time off during the summer to enjoy the weather and spend time with family members. Accordingly it can prove difficult to conduct outreach to them at this time of year. However, in **Lanark County** various chambers of commerce sponsor golf tournaments from June to September which many local businesses regularly attend. Bearing this local knowledge in mind, the Outreach Coordinator was able to secure a booth at three golf tournaments (Carleton Place and District Chamber of Commerce, the Smiths Falls and District Chamber of Commerce, and the Tweed Shot-Gun Golf Tournament Fundraiser). This led her to be able to inform over 100 employers per event.

Outreach coordinators also kept up-to-date on local issues by reading print media and being active on social media, such as Facebook and Eventbrite. This led them to become informed about local activities such as special events, conferences, and meetings to attend to promote the project goals.

A local challenge: One challenge did emerge early on in the project. Originally, the pilot was planned to be delivered not only in Ottawa, and in Lanark and Renfrew Counties, but also in another county. Shortly after the project was launched in November 2016 it became apparent that some local organizations did not welcome the AODA being promoted in their region because they believed that this work was already being done by a local service provider.

While there were a number of conversations that occurred to reassure local stakeholders that the AODA project and EARN were present to support their efforts around accessibility and inclusion, this issue could not be resolved in a timely manner. The decision was made, therefore, to

withdraw from this county and to concentrate outreach efforts in Lanark and Renfrew Counties, and in Ottawa.

Different approaches to outreach

The outreach coordinators adopted several means of outreach in order to reach as many businesses as possible in ways that would meet employers' needs and time constraints. In the weekly reports submitted by each coordinator the following methods of outreach were used most frequently.

Walk-ins

This approach was utilized by all the outreach coordinators throughout the project. This is a challenging method of outreach because it took initiative and courage to go into a business where the coordinator may or may not have had a contact. To do this well, here are some of the strategies that the coordinators used in order to maximize this opportunity to educate and inform:

- Practice how the conversation could evolve before entering the business - the Discovery Conversation proved a useful tool in practicing;
- Start with known contacts. Having 'broken the ice' by visiting 'warm leads' first, it became easier for Outreach Coordinators to conduct outreach with businesses with whom they had had no previous contact;
- Plan where walk-ins will take place in advance;
- Use Google maps as a resource to plan routes;
- Look around the establishment to see if there is any positive feedback to give about accessibility changes employers may have made before engaging an employer in conversation: they appreciated hearing about how a small suggestion could benefit their business and bottom line – e.g. considering offering at home or delivery services to people with disabilities and/or seniors in winter months when travel is more difficult to make customer service more effective or consider installing an affordable temporary ramp to

increase the customer base and potential job opportunities for job seekers with disabilities;

- Be persistent and be prepared to wait while the business person serves customers;
- Go back again to talk to a business person if the employer is too busy to talk during the first visit; and
- Here is some general advice:
 1. Be mindful, respectful, and patient;
 2. Be interested in the business and its products/services;
 3. Be polite, professional and positive; and
 4. Above all, listen attentively.

Warm leads (i.e. contacts from personal networks, United Ways)

The outreach coordinators were hired in part for their knowledge of their neighborhoods and so team members all had warm leads to start their outreach. The relationships that leaders in the United Ways taking part in the project contributed to the success of the project also. Warm leads that the regional directors in Lanark and Renfrew Counties were able to pass on to the outreach coordinators were invaluable.

Presentations/booths

To have the best opportunity to set up a booth or to give a presentation, the coordinators used the following approaches:

- Review event apps weekly;
- Check chambers of commerce and BIA websites for upcoming events;
- Sign up for newsletters with chambers, BIAs, and other relevant sectors as relevant to the community;
- Attend local community fairs (e.g. Toy Fair in Lanark);
- Attend Business Leadership events (Women's Business Leadership groups);
- Attend lead organization events (e.g. United Way); and
- Network, network, network!

What seemed to be the pattern was that one invitation to attend a meeting, give a presentation or to have a booth then led to more networking and engagement opportunities. For example, the Outreach Coordinator in Renfrew County was invited to sit in on an Ottawa Valley Business Network Meeting and from that networking opportunity she was invited back to speak about the AODA project the following week.

Further, **how** outreach coordinators used these networking and information sharing opportunities made a difference to the number and quality of interactions with businesses. One of the outreach coordinators employed an innovative and successful approach to educating businesses. It was two-pronged: first, find **a strategic location** for a booth and then have an engaging **opening script** to encourage interest in the AODA. In the words of Amy Elsner, Outreach Coordinator in Lanark County:

“With the Carleton Place Chamber AGM I was right beside the buffet table line. Great place to be! Everyone looked at the booth as they went by and asked ‘Are you in line?’ and I said ‘No, I’m with the United Way to promote awareness on accessibility.’ Plus when I spoke with people while others were waiting in line, you could see they were also listening.” (March 21st, 2017, AODA Weekly Report).

Information sessions

Another effective way to provide intimate learning opportunities was to hold information sessions.

These sessions initially took place primarily in Ottawa because there were many more venues available. There were eight information sessions held over the course of the project informing groups of up to 12 attendees. Promoting these events through the United Way Centraide Ottawa and through the EARN network proved effective in bringing businesses together.

We also held these events at different times of the day (breakfast, lunch and late afternoon) to make them convenient for our target audience to attend. Lunch and Learn events seemed to be slightly more enticing to employers than those held at other times of the day. Further as a result of these education sessions six organizations joined EARN in Ottawa.

In Renfrew County four Breakfast and Learn Information Events were held for small groups of up to 18 attendees in the towns of Renfrew, Arnprior,

Deep River and Petawawa, and this sparked interest not only in the AODA and its message of accessibility but also in EARN; two new memberships resulted from a meeting in the town of Renfrew.

Bringing **an inclusion lens** to promoting the AODA: To demonstrate our commitment to accessibility, the Outreach Coordinator in Renfrew County engaged a local artist with a disability (visual impairment) to create a poster to promote the information sessions and to use when giving presentations.

The sessions held in Ottawa and in Renfrew County received positive feedback from attendees, an indication that the messaging around accessibility had been heard:

“Good knowledge and education”

“Very well done and informative”

“I have learned a lot about EARN.”

“Eye opening and very worthwhile.”

Saiema Zaman, the Outreach Coordinator for Ottawa East & South noted:

“Even a small group of individuals attending an information session creates a positive impact as they will spread the word to other business owners”.

What works best in each community?

Best strategies for urban areas:

1. Prioritize business districts and neighborhoods for outreach early on in project implementation;
2. Re-visit the choice of priority areas by holding one or more planning and strategy meetings, the number of meetings will depend on project duration;
3. Network strategically: Reaching out to contacts who are business leaders is essential; these contacts frequently lead to referrals to

more business leaders and organizations. This approach creates 'buy-in' to the message of accessibility and more opportunities to promote the AODA;

4. Recognize high customer volume: Businesses in urban areas usually have a high customer volume. It may be necessary to wait until the business person has finished a transaction with a customer before beginning a conversation about the AODA
5. Be succinct: In an urban area there needs to be a reason for the outreach coordinator's presence. Be prepared to summarize the reason for the visit succinctly, simply and quickly before providing information;
6. Hold educational events in different areas of the city and at different times of day: In Ottawa this approach gave businesses more opportunities to attend an Information Session; and
7. Consider the little things: Whenever possible we chose venues where there was free parking. In Ottawa parking is expensive and therefore the value of attending a free event could be diminished if participants had to pay for parking.

Best strategies for rural areas:

1. Ensure you have a reputation for openness and transparency because this is critical: in smaller communities most people know who their neighbors are and therefore building and nurturing productive relationships with others is critical to successful outreach;
2. Be known in the community: Outreach coordinators found they had to become known before businesses would trust them to speak about the AODA, otherwise they could be dismissed politely when they visited businesses;
3. Use a 'top down' approach to outreach: A successful way to become known in rural areas was to find opportunities to attend and/or present at town councils, municipal meetings, accessibility committees, chambers of commerce, etc.;
4. Recognize that in smaller communities many people 'wear many hats'. Therefore speaking at a town council meeting reaches many small and medium businesses as well;

5. Take the time to have in-depth conversations, this is valued in smaller rural communities;
6. Think differently: Many small businesses in small communities are located in historic buildings which are not physically accessible. The **Stop Gap** initiative provides affordable temporary ramps. There was wide support for Stop Gap in Lanark and Renfrew Counties. Conversations about the value of ramps were a very successful way to lead into talking about how increasing accessibility into a business would lead to better customer service and could also lead to opportunities to hire people with disabilities who would benefit from accessible access. Thus promoting Stop Gap led to more opportunities to promote the Employment Standard of the *Act*; and
7. Understand that logistics matter: Knowing what time of day businesses open and what days of the week they are open matters. Opening times can vary in rural communities, especially those where tourism comprises a significant segment of the local economy.

Differences between urban and rural communities

1. Outreach coordinators reported finding more sole proprietors with one or two employees in rural communities. This meant that more time had to be taken to reach the same number of participants in a rural community than in an urban area;
2. Distance between communities and businesses is more of an issue in rural communities than it is in an urban area and therefore had to be factored into consideration when setting weekly outreach goals for the different United Ways taking part in the project;
3. Poverty and rates of unemployment: Across many of the rural communities in Lanark and Renfrew there are higher rates of poverty and unemployment, and a lower standard of living. The outreach coordinators working in these areas had to be sensitive to these local realities in conversations about the AODA. Employers would report that they couldn't afford to hire any new staff. The outreach coordinators learned to respond to these concerns by saying that if a business could hire someone in the future, consider hiring a person with a disability and then go on to make the business case about the value of this talent pool;

4. Coverage in print and online media seemed to be much easier to obtain in rural communities than in the urban area of Ottawa. For example, chambers of commerce welcomed story ideas for e newsletters and Facebook articles. It was a great deal more difficult to attract media coverage in Ottawa;
5. Connecting with chambers of commerce also seemed to be easier to accomplish in rural communities, where chamber members were fewer and speakers for events were more eagerly sought. In Ottawa many more businesses join chambers of commerce and this results in more rules on how networking can take place and so more time and effort is required to build these relationships;
6. There was a real hunger for information on the AODA and on hiring persons with disabilities in the smaller rural communities. This led to more invitations to speak at accessibility committees, town and municipal meetings in rural areas than in Ottawa. The City of Ottawa has an established commitment to accessibility and therefore had less requirement for information about the AODA;
7. There are more venues to hold events available in an urban area and this led to more Information Sessions being held in Ottawa than in Lanark and Renfrew Counties; and
8. There were fewer events that offered opportunities for outreach to businesses that take place during the summer months in the rural communities than in the urban area of Ottawa. This led the Outreach Coordinator in Lanark County to be innovative in finding ways to reach out to businesses in the summer. Having a booth at large golf tournaments where over a hundred businesses per event attended was one very creative way to address this problem.

Overall strategies adaptable to other regions

Nurturing relationships

The focus of our project was collaboration and it allowed us to develop new relationships and to deepen existing ones in the community with chambers of commerce, BIAs, town councils, accessibility committees, community organizations, and individual employers. Immediate impact is hard to measure in specific or quantifiable terms. However, over time we know that

impact will evolve and bring more tangible results. Here is what occurred over the course of the pilot:

- 45 new members have joined EARN;
- Increased brand recognition for EARN and United Ways;
- Organizations are calling EARN to learn more about the AODA and hiring persons with disabilities;
- Increased opportunities for fundraising activities for United Ways;
- Increased unsolicited requests to provide presentations to accessibility committees and town councils;
- Increased and new use of Stop Gap in rural market areas; and
- Local chambers offered to help us continue the AODA message post project.

Here is an example of nurturing relationships in action:

The Outreach Coordinator in Lanark County took to heart the value of nurturing relationships with key local partners: she conducted outreach to Lanark County's three chambers of commerce in Carleton Place, Perth and Smiths Falls, BIAs, and the Mississippi Mills Economic Development Committee. Developing and nurturing these relationships had definite impact over the course of the project. An article she wrote about the AODA was posted three times on Perth County's Facebook page. Carleton Place and Smiths Falls Chamber of Commerce, and the Perth BIA posted articles of hers in their monthly newsletters. One of her pieces is now posted permanently on the Smiths Falls website. The goodwill earned through nurturing relationships with the chambers led to United Way Lanark County being able to have a booth at three golf tournaments in the summer of 2017, and being invited to give presentations about EARN and the AODA at various events. These relationships also played a role in sustaining the impact of the AODA message: by the end of the project all three chambers in Lanark County had agreed to display AODA information at their offices on an ongoing basis.

The example above demonstrates how nurturing relationships with community partners earns goodwill, sustains project impact over time and

heightens awareness of the value that an organization brings to the subject matter community wide. A significant result for our project was the extent to which organizations across the amalgamated region were reaching out to United Ways for expertise and support as a result of growing our presence and reputation in the community.

Leveraging partners within an established network

United Way Centraide Ottawa has an established network, EARN. Each EARN member has its own network of employers and relationships it has nurtured. EARN was therefore able to create a much larger footprint for the project through leveraging the greater collective reach of its partners. This ability to leverage partners and thereby greatly increase impact is one that can be applied to other organizations with established networks. Nurturing ongoing and productive relationships with partners over time is the key to being able to leverage this much greater collective impact in the community.

Leveraging partners for United Ways without an established network

The rural United Ways that took part in the project did not have an established network, like EARN. However, they too had partners through the organizations they fund, their donor base, and the relationships they have established and nurtured in the community.

For example, the Regional Director in Renfrew County is also a City Councilor for the City of Pembroke and she had previously worked in broadcasting which meant she had cultivated a significant number of relationships within local municipal government and business leaders throughout the county. The Regional Director in Lanark County had been in his role for a number of years and had nurtured many positive relationships with chambers of commerce, community organizations and local businesses. As well, the outreach coordinators also leveraged organizations within their respective communities based on their individual networks.

Accordingly, this multitude of partnerships were leveraged to engage more employers and community leaders than would have been possible otherwise and thereby increase the impact of the project. This approach is applicable to any community organization.

Leveraging partners by engaging with other stakeholders

This model was designed and delivered with the United Way located in Ottawa as its central hub with surrounding rural area partners. The EARN network was the ideal vehicle through which to implement such a model given the synergy between EARN's mandate to improve employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and the accessibility messaging of the AODA.

For other organizations interested in designing and delivering a similarly styled regional model for an urban hub with surrounding rural areas, the same strategies hold true:

- Leverage the partnerships you have established in your community;
- Leverage the resources of your partners;
- Nurture relationships that are established in your community;
- Strengthen existing relationships by working toward a common goal / project; and
- Create new relationships by working toward a common goal / project.

Role of service providers

Service providers played an important role in creating buy-in for the AODA project. Although not named as the primary target audience their support was critical to project success. Why? These organizations are the gatekeepers to relationships with large numbers of employers in the community.

Their support and endorsement was critical to achieve, especially in the smaller rural communities where social acceptance and willing to hear our accessibility message was based on establishing and maintaining positive relationships. Employment Networks in the town of Renfrew, for instance, willingly promoted the AODA Breakfast and Learn information sessions to their employer partners based on this positive engagement.

Service providers in Ottawa and Ottawa East and South proactively reached out to EARN and requested information sessions for their staff in order to be well-informed on the AODA and compliance requirements. We also knew that if service providers were better informed they would in turn

better inform the employers with whom they worked. This impact is difficult to measure, nevertheless, we believe that a ‘ripple effect’ is certain to happen over time.

EARN’s members who are service providers are an important resource for employers too; they provide the services and supports to refer qualified job seekers to employers. It cannot be forgotten also that service providers are themselves employers, the vast majority of EARN’s current service provider members falling into the category of small and medium sized businesses, and so we wanted to ensure that the message of accessibility was heard by them as well. Engaging service providers and gaining their endorsement led to more understanding for the concept of EARN as a vehicle of ongoing support and resources for themselves and their employer partners i.e. sustainability in promoting the message of inclusion and accessible hiring.

“Top down” versus “bottom up” approaches to outreach

Walk-ins can be viewed as a quintessential form of the ‘bottom up’ approach to outreach, similar to making a cold call over the telephone. In rural communities, by contrast, a top down approach was deemed to be the most effective one. The outreach coordinators in Lanark and Renfrew Counties learned the value of this approach from their regional directors and because they knew their local communities.

By gaining the support of local leaders they created a more receptive audience for outreach on the AODA. Being known in the community was identified as a best practice by the coordinators in Lanark and Renfrew Counties, and therefore, the top down approach was effective in getting them known in their own communities and thereby creating a receptive audience for learning about the AODA.

Further we found that in smaller communities one person ‘wears many hats’ and so by engaging local leaders through a top down approach – members of town and municipal councils and accessibility committees for instance – many more small and medium employers heard the message of accessibility.

Outreach Coordinator Bonnie Schryer related how this top down approach worked for her in Renfrew County:

“For me the most logical route was to reach out to the very top which is the County of Renfrew where all the municipalities gather regularly. I was introduced to the Public Relations manager Mike Barber who also chaired the Accessibility Committee. He was a great wealth of knowledge with an incredible network. He was totally supportive of my plan to try and reach all the municipalities and succeeded in having the Warden of the County, Jennifer Murphy, speak about our project and that I would be visiting the small to medium size businesses as well as their municipal meetings. In a rural county like Renfrew County and the city of Pembroke, the majority of the council members in each area also have another job, mostly business owners. From there the network grew covering my jurisdiction and connecting me to individuals who knew their community best so I could get a head start.”

Understanding cross-cultural issues

Our project focused on exploring how we could educate and inform businesses about the AODA and its message of inclusion pertaining to hiring practices. We learned that many small businesses in Ontario are owned and operated by newcomers and immigrants whose first language was neither English nor French.

To deliver our message around accessibility, we realized that we needed to be able to communicate effectively with these small and medium sized businesses in order to be inclusive of all Ontarians. Accordingly we researched and created a *Building Cross Cultural Competency* document. The Outreach Coordinator for Ottawa East and South, herself a member of an immigrant family, took the lead on creating this resource.

Here is just one example of what we learned. In mainstream North American culture looking someone in the eye directly is considered a good communication strategy in business. However, in other cultures, looking someone in the eye is considered impolite and disrespectful. More on understanding cross-cultural issues is contained in the Ottawa East and

South success story on page 42. The cross-cultural document is included in Appendix A.

Other learnings

The list below details some overall strategies and tips that can be employed in any environment, whether it be urban or rural.

Preparation:

1. Create a standard information kit and become familiar with its contents. Have several copies available for ready use. Our project focused on the AODA, the resources that EARN offers and the value that the United Way gives to each community, these materials were included in every kit;
2. Research the businesses in the project designated community, whether it is an urban area or a rural location;
3. Use project resources effectively, conduct outreach where there is a large concentration of small/medium businesses;
4. Know what products/services the business offers before visiting and/or engaging in conversation;
5. Know the times of day and the days of the week that the business is open;
6. Sign up for chamber of commerce and BIA newsletters and any other applicable newsletters or e-mail group lists that will provide awareness of local events that businesses would attend; and
7. Review Eventbrite to find out more about local events that could provide opportunities to promote the AODA.

Educational materials:

8. Use Accessibility Directorate resources to conduct outreach; and
9. Create project specific materials to meet employer needs. For instance, we created a *Getting Started* document that was customized for each United Way with local contact coordinates.

On-site outreach:

10. Be friendly and professional;
11. Visit business and talk to people already known first to become comfortable with informing them about the AODA;
12. Communicate the reason for your visit succinctly, regardless of the length of your conversation (i.e. urban versus rural differences);
13. Understand that speaking with an outreach coordinator is time taken away from their customers and making a living so be mindful of their time;
14. Re-visit the business when staff/owners are too busy to have a conversation, e.g. by making an appointment to come back during less busy hours;
15. Position the AODA and the Employment Standard as a benefit to businesses / business owners i.e. make the business case;
16. Think of any problems or issues the business may encounter with accessibility and try to provide solutions to them before business people have a chance to express their doubts about being able to become accessible. This can be accomplished by sharing stories on how other businesses may have overcome a particular issue or ideas that a coordinator has thought of prior to or upon visiting the business; and
17. Understand that while they may not be hiring now as their business prospers they may do so in the future, and that will be occasion to consider persons with disabilities as a new talent pool.

The value of networking:

18. Connect with and present where possible to any chamber of commerce, BIA, accessibility committees, town/municipal councils, service provider and other business groups;
19. Attend events that the lead organization or partner holds. Set up a booth or present when possible. For example, the City of Ottawa is a valued EARN partner. EARN was named as the City of Ottawa AccessAbility community partner for 2017, the theme in 2017 being employability. This honour led to more prominence for accessibility: EARN, the AODA project and the United Way Centraide Ottawa

were all represented at the Proclamation Ceremony held to celebrate the day at Ottawa's City Hall on June 1, 2017;

20. Use all media channels (print, online, email) available locally to promote more understanding of the AODA and to advertise information sessions, presentations and/or booths at events;
21. View networking as an ongoing strategy throughout project activities; and
22. Be nimble and open to learning on the go.

Challenges

We found surprisingly few negative responses to the AODA and compliance requirements. However, there were some definite concerns expressed. These are detailed below:

1. Some small businesses with only two or three employees did not think that the AODA applied to their organization;
2. Businesses that had not begun to work on making their businesses accessible were overwhelmed by what needed to be completed by the end of 2017 to become compliant;
3. It was expressed that 'the government' was imposing more rules that they had to comply with and thus causing hardship for small businesses;
4. The impact of poverty in rural regions led some small business owners to state that they could not hire any new staff, and so they were unprepared to consider persons with disabilities as a talent pool;
5. The increase in the minimum wage was seen as a disincentive for retaining staff and/or hiring new staff, including considering persons with disabilities; and
6. The Accessibility Directorate of Ontario website was viewed by some businesses as difficult to navigate and technical difficulties in completing compliance reports online were cited by a few small businesses.

When outreach coordinators heard these responses they always responded by listening attentively, clarifying information and offering

support to access online resources and reporting templates. The outreach coordinators kept conversations focused on the value of the AODA and how implementing its requirements would benefit businesses i.e. making the business case, and on the value that persons with disabilities bring as talented and reliable employees. The coordinators did not offer opinions on issues, such as the increase in the minimum wage, as these were outside their area of expertise and detracted from the positive message about accessibility and inclusion. They also positioned themselves as being employees of the United Ways and present to provide information and support as needed. This approach often served to alleviate employer concerns.

Engaging outreach coordinators

Effectively engaging outreach coordinators was essential for the AODA project to succeed in reaching its goals, especially when the project was being delivered in three separate locations. By working together we learned about the best ways to deliver the accessibility and inclusion message of the AODA, promote the value of the EARN network, and pivot to the valuable work that United Ways do in the community to support vulnerable groups (including persons with disabilities).

Hosting weekly reporting conference calls proved the most effective means of engaging outreach coordinators; it also served as an effective strategy for team building, and sharing information and proactive problem solving.

Examples of engagement activities are listed below.

1. Holding a joint training session during onboarding for the Outreach Coordinators;
2. Setting weekly numeric goals for outreach facilitated engagement and project focus;
3. Completing weekly reports to document the week's events, successes and challenges;
4. Creating biographies of each outreach coordinator and publishing them in EARN's e newsletter;
5. Keeping in regular touch with each coordinator on an as needed basis through email and telephone conversations; and
6. Inviting outreach coordinators to signature EARN events -

- a. The City of Ottawa chose employability as the 2017 theme for its Annual AccessAbility Day. EARN was invited to take part as the official community partner and named in the AccessAbility Day Proclamation. Accordingly Outreach Coordinators were invited to attend this event. The AODA project was represented at the Opening Ceremonies; and
- b. All the outreach coordinators were invited to attend EARN's Annual Conference held in Ottawa on June 6th. An AODA Information Session took place directly after the conference, another way to amplify the accessibility message.

Strategies for team building:

The following strategies for team building were found to be effective:

1. Recognize and reward achievements when milestones were reached and/or when successes occurred;
2. Encouraging project team members to consult and to tap into everyone's ideas and knowledge via the weekly conference calls / emails / telephone conversations;
3. Seeking outreach coordinator expertise on the development of project educational materials (e.g. the Power Point, Cross-Cultural Competency Best Practices);
4. Profiling the project activities and impact of each project area in EARN's monthly newsletter.

Information sharing and proactive problem solving

The following methods of information sharing and proactive problem-solving proved effective:

1. Weekly reporting conference calls served to give timely opportunities for information and expertise to be shared and issues discussed. As the coordinators became active in their respective communities issues arose that could be solved better together than separately;
2. Weekly reports offered opportunities for reflection on the week's experience to improve performance;

3. The Weekly Conference Call Agenda included discussion of successes and challenges as standing items; and
4. Several topics were discussed during the calls and these discussions served as effective means of information sharing and problem-solving.

The following lists the major topics discussed during our calls:

- Best practices for outreach into the community – what are the dos and don'ts?
- Effective strategies to conduct walk-ins
- Methods to attract employers to a booth during an event
- What have you learned this week?
- What is your success story this week?
- How does poverty in rural areas impact employer responses to the AODA?
- Do job seekers/employees have to disclose a disability? – this topic was in response to a business inquiry
- How can businesses located in historic buildings with limited physical access become accessible to people with disabilities (both customers and employees)?
- How can employers check on their compliance reporting?
- How to respond to employers who do not believe they can hire persons with disabilities when the minimum wage is raised to \$15.00 per hour
- How to reassure employers who are distrustful of anyone whom they believe represents the government and then to engage them in productive conversations about the AODA
- Cross-Cultural Competency Best Practices

Success Stories: Illuminating Impact & Best Practices

Lanark County: Nurturing relationships with community partners

Conducting outreach can be challenging during the summer in rural communities as many establishments close their doors when small business owners go on vacation. However, the Golf Tournaments organized by local chambers of commerce are very popular in Lanark County. The summer golf tournaments, therefore, became an innovative and creative way to educate and inform a large number of businesses about the AODA and accessibility. The question for the Outreach Coordinator: how to encourage businesses to visit a booth promoting the AODA? It was decided to incorporate an interactive component, a simulation of disability, to attract as many visitors as possible.

In the words of Amy Elsner, Outreach Coordinator, from United Way Lanark County:

“We participated in three golf tournaments this summer: The Carleton Place and District Chamber of Commerce, the Smiths Falls and District Chamber of Commerce, and the Tweed Shot-Gun Golf Tournament Fundraiser.

On behalf of the AODA project, the United Way of Lanark County and Smiths Falls sponsored a hole at the Carleton Place and District Chamber of Commerce, the Smiths Falls and District Chamber of Commerce, and the Tweed Shot-Gun Golf Tournament Fundraiser. Along with having a booth and signs to create awareness about the AODA and accessibility for Ontarians’ with disabilities, we wanted to create an interactive event whereby people could experience what it could feel like to golf from the perspective of someone who has a disability. We created a putting challenge, whereby, all the teams that came through our hole, had the option to participate in the challenge before they made their official golf shot.

The challenge was to putt from the perspective of someone who had a stroke and a mobility disability, such as arthritis. They were asked to wear glasses that simulated how vision would be affected for a person who had a stroke on the right side of their brain. The left side of each lens was blacked out. This greatly affected the vision of anyone who was a right handed putter. The participants were also asked to wear a pair of golf gloves where we taped the middle and

ring finger together. This too would affect their putt as they would be prevented from properly gripping the club.

There were over one hundred people who participated in each golf tournament, and we are happy to say that everyone participated in the challenge! As they took part in the challenge, we were able to speak with all the participants about the AODA project, creating awareness about accessibility and inclusivity for persons with disabilities. It was well received. Many participants shared stories about their experiences regarding personal disabilities or those of someone they knew and/or asked questions about how they could make their services more accessible. It was a great eye opening event and an amazing day! We have already been invited by the Carleton Place and District Chamber of Commerce to participate in another challenge next year.”

Ottawa: Leveraging EARN network members

Linda Simpson is a strong champion for accessibility and a founding member of EARN. She is the Director of Performance Plus Rehabilitative Care Inc., a for-profit small business and service provider. She gave the Ottawa AODA team a referral to Jas Jassal, a small business owner of two companies, Netchill Media Groups and Jas Auto Spa. Netchill Media Group is a web design company. When he was contacted, Jas was very interested in learning more about the AODA, and he registered to attend an information session held in April 2017.

Katelian Bentley, Ottawa Outreach Coordinator, wrote about the value to employers of attending an information session. In her words:

“When you attend an AODA training session, you will receive the information and help you need to understand the AODA, and how to make your organization compliant with the Act. Organizations who attend training sessions gain a greater understanding of the value of hiring people with disabilities and the economic benefits of implementing the AODA in the workplace.

These in-person sessions give you the opportunity to ask questions, learn from other employers, and engage in discussions about accessibility. Participants also learn about the resources EARN offers to support them in becoming more accessible in their employment

practices. These include: access to continuing education opportunities, accessibility toolkits, a monthly newsletter on disability and employment, hiring resources, and networking opportunities with like-minded employers and jobseekers with disabilities.

The AODA training sessions offer an opportunity to ensure your business is accessible and inclusive to a new client base and a new potential employee base.”

Information sessions also gave the opportunity for discussion. At the session he attended, Jas revealed that he is himself a person with a disability, and in addition to the web design company, he has also started a small auto shop where he focuses on hiring persons with disabilities, whenever possible. After the AODA session, Katelian Bentley and the Project Officer met to discuss the value of EARN. Subsequently, Netchill Media Group and Jas Auto Spa joined EARN.

Another benefit of developing this relationship was that Jas later took part as a panelist at EARN's Annual Conference held in June 2017 and spoke about his experience as a person with a disability starting his own company and his commitment to inclusive hiring. This success story and its impact came about as the result of a phone call from a service provider to the AODA project team in Ottawa, a great example of leveraging one of EARN's partners.

Ottawa East: Building cross-cultural competency

One key learning from our project was the realization that many small and medium size business owners are immigrants and newcomers, whose first language is neither English nor French. This had an impact on outreach to these businesses. The issue of how to effectively communicate with them was first raised during one of the weekly conference calls. This initial conversation led us to explore the concept of best practices in cross-cultural communication.

The Outreach Coordinator for Ottawa East and South, Saiema Zaman, agreed to research this topic; her background is in communications, and, in addition to being multi-lingual, she is a member of an immigrant family from South Asia. To become more knowledgeable she conducted her own research and attended Hire Immigrants Ottawa (HIO) training. HIO is another initiative managed by United Way Centraide Ottawa making it

seamless for Saiema to reach out to them as a respected resource on cross-cultural communication.

HIO brings together employers, immigrant agencies and stakeholders to enhance employers' ability to access the talents of skilled immigrants in the Ottawa area. The initiative was launched in 2006 as a response to a growing need to identify and address barriers and challenges employers face in attracting, hiring and integrating skilled immigrants into the labour force. HIO's mandate is to increase the capacity of employers in the Ottawa region to more effectively attract, hire and integrate skilled immigrants into skills-appropriate positions.

The result of her training and research was the creation of a best practices resource, *"Building Cross- Cultural Competency"* (see Appendix A). This document was discussed and shared with her colleagues to increase capacity amongst all members of the team.

Saiema's knowledge of best practices in cross cultural communication also had a positive impact on her outreach. She was able to communicate effectively with members of other cultures in the east and south end of Ottawa where many newcomers and immigrants own businesses. In fact, all four of the memberships with EARN she achieved were from this community. Here is the story Saiema related about her experiences reaching out to newcomers in Ottawa's east and south end neighborhoods:

"One of the first businesses I met was with Qamar Masood from Q.M. Auto Clinic. He is the owner of a busy garage in the Ottawa South region. Qamar was very receptive and had a lot of great input to provide to me about the AODA and his experiences as an employer. I mentioned the EARN initiative to him in which he was interested, however he did not have the time to commit as he was very busy with his business and other commitments. In August and September, we planned AODA information sessions for employers and I had invited Qamar to attend one of these sessions. Fortunately, he was able to attend our Lunch and Learn event that occurred at Palki Cuisine of India on September 19th.

At the Lunch and Learn, Qamar said: 'I'm onboard. What I want to know is how to hire someone with a disability. I need someone to work in my garage or do admin. Where do I start?'

My colleagues and I were impressed and were ready to help him and address his questions. A week and half after our event, the Project Officer Susan Forster and I met with Qamar to discuss further how EARN could support him with access to supports to hire persons with disabilities and he ended up joining EARN as an employer!”

Renfrew County: The Stop Gap initiative

The Stop Gap Foundation began in Toronto, led by Luke Anderson. Luke was a promising engineer, gifted athlete and outdoor enthusiast who became physically disabled following a mountain bike accident. He soon discovered that accessibility for someone using a wheelchair poses barriers to entry to many buildings, especially those located in historic neighborhoods with one or two-step storefronts. His frustration with this new reality led to the idea of building affordable, temporary ramps as the solution and as a means of raising awareness.

From the Stop Gap website; *“It became clear from the incredibly positive outcome of the first Community Ramp Project that similar projects could be launched in different communities across the GTA. It also proved to have huge potential in raising awareness about accessibility on a national scale.”*

Building ramps may at first glance not appear to have direct relevance to our project with its focus on educating small and medium sized businesses about the AODA and the Employment Standard. However, Stop Gap temporary ramps are a visible symbol of accessibility, one that businesses can easily grasp the significance of and afford to implement. By making their businesses more physically accessible, customer service improves as more people with disabilities buy their products or use their services. Once a business is more accessible to customers, then businesses can begin to hire more people with disabilities. In fact, the outreach coordinators in Lanark and Renfrew Counties found that by beginning a conversation about Stop Gap, they could easily pivot to the AODA and the benefitting of considering hiring persons with disabilities.

Bonnie Schryrer, Outreach Coordinator in Renfrew County, has become a supporter of Stop Gap because she sees this connection and how the Stop Gap initiative builds on the accessibility message of the AODA. In her words:

“I made a cold call to a childhood friend whom I had heard was a part of a business network. Pam Behnke-Van Hoof is the Chair of the Ottawa Valley Business Network and she invited me to their lunch meeting the next day just to listen and be introduced. From there, I was invited back to do a presentation on the AODA to their network the following week. I mentioned Stop Gap as one practical way to create better customer service for people with disabilities. After that meeting, Andrew Sims from Alair Homes, which is a contracting business, was very interested and wanted to know more. He decided to contact Stop Gap and created a partnership with them. They will help make Renfrew County become more accessible by building the ramps for businesses who need them with materials donated by the hardware businesses in each community.”

Bonnie achieved real impact in her presentation to the Ottawa Valley Business Network. First she gave an overview of the AODA, the standards and compliance requirements. Then she also presented Stop Gap as one affordable and tangible means of implementing good customer service. She made the point that more people with various mobility and agility disabilities could be hired once more businesses became more accessible. Alair Homes’ commitment to promote Stop Gap on an ongoing basis will give the message of accessibility and its relationship to the AODA sustainability and impact in Renfrew County long after the United Way’s AODA project concludes.

Conclusions

Here is what we learned:

Launching a project:

- Having United Way Ottawa as the lead organization to provide centralized HR, IT and managerial resources and supports to the project was integral to its success;
- Having the leadership of the regional directors in each United Way was an integral part of our success;
- Having stakeholder and partner engagement in each pilot prior to commencing the project was essential because it provided a baseline of support from which to launch project activities;
- Nurturing relationships with community partners and leveraging partners within EARN and United Way networks had several positive impacts. It led to effectively communicating the message of accessibility and the AODA; increasing awareness of the value of EARN, increased membership in EARN, increased understanding of what United Ways do in their communities, and the sustainability of project messaging after the project is completed;
- Giving outreach coordinators adequate time at the beginning of the project to become familiar with the AODA and the message of accessibility enabled them to be productive in conversations with businesses and to reach project goals. For example, the Discovery Conversation tool assisted outreach coordinators in learning about how to converse with small/medium businesses;
- Key factors contributed to reaching project deliverables:
 - Developing a solid reporting structure and data collection process
 - Holding weekly conference reporting calls to share successes and challenges and completing weekly tracking of results
 - Developing project tools and resources customized to be region specific through the collaboration of all project partners, and
 - Building an effective and engaged outreach team;
- Holding Information Sessions was effective in educating small groups of businesses, and more successful in an urban environment than in rural areas;

- Tailoring and adapting the resources that were provided by the ADO as needed based on geographic circumstances, these were very useful for informing and educating businesses;
- Having the opportunity to complete recruitment prior to launching the project would have given more time to dedicate to project delivery, as the first several weeks were focused on hiring and onboarding staff;

Understanding local issues:

- Gaining a broad understanding of the differences and similarities between conducting outreach in urban and rural communities benefited project outcomes because outreach coordinators were better informed on how best to communicate with the target audience;
- Understanding a key local issue: In rural communities a top down approach to outreach works well as a means of becoming known and respected, especially in communities where local leaders may be local business people too. Nurturing relationships with town councils, municipal councils and accessibility committees was, therefore, an effective means of promoting the project to businesses in rural communities;
- Learning about the Stop Gap initiative, and its popularity in rural communities, and being able to communicate its value to businesses enriched the engagement with our target audience, and it proved a tangible and affordable way for them to embrace creating more accessible customer service and increasing potential hires of job seekers with disabilities;
- Recognizing the lack of traction for the project in the additional county led us to realize that more preparation and knowledge of the landscape and local stakeholders, using data, and conducting an environmental scan was required before launching;

Communications:

- Developing a communications plan that encompassed all forms of media & social media coverage led to more awareness of the AODA project and attendance at events
- Obtaining media coverage was easier in rural communities than in Ottawa. If we had known this, we would have adjusted the communications plan to reflect this reality;
- Profiling the project in 11 editions of EARN's newsletter gave us an audience primed to hear accessibility messaging;

Best practices:

- Becoming aware of cross-cultural communication issues and creating the Building Cross-Communications Competency document provided outreach coordinators with strategies, tools and best practices in communicating effectively with businesses run by newcomers and immigrants in Ontario's multicultural landscape;
- Realizing that service providers played an important role in creating buy-in for the AODA project. These organizations were gatekeepers to relationships with established networks of employers in the community;
- Having a poster to promote the AODA created by an artist with a disability demonstrated commitment to accessibility and inclusion;
- Discovering that each situation prompted new insights and learning required us to be nimble and flexible in order to learn on the go;

Sustainability:

- Framing EARN as an ongoing source of resources and support for small and medium businesses encouraged more businesses to be motivated to learn about the AODA and to join EARN.

Recommendations:

Here are our recommendations to replicate a similar project:

1. Designate a lead organization to provide centralized supports and resources;
2. Nurture relationships with stakeholders and leaders in the community relevant to your project goals and objectives;
3. Leverage the strength of your networks and/or community partners to increase the project footprint and effectively amplify project messaging to your target audience;
4. Complete recruitment prior to launching your project, if possible;
5. Lay a solid foundation of knowledge and put in place relevant reporting mechanisms and methods of team engagement prior to project implementation;
6. Develop approaches that are tailored by municipality and by business;
7. Be knowledgeable of local neighborhoods and local issues. This includes gaining an understanding of urban and rural differences in the territory where the project is going to be implemented;
8. Be aware of your allies and your detractors in each community before launching a project. Conduct an environmental scan to collect evidence-based data in order to be knowledgeable of the local landscape, stakeholders and issues;
9. Be knowledgeable about cross-cultural issues, essential in effectively reaching out in Ontario's diverse multicultural landscape;
10. Have buy-in from key community stakeholders who act as gatekeepers to networks of contacts who could benefit your project;
11. Create a communications plan that reflects the media / social media opportunities of the geographic locations where outreach will occur;
12. Promote and monitor the project within all channels of communication with your stakeholders and partners (e.g. newsletter, blog, Facebook, etc.);
13. Be open to learning about innovative programs and initiatives that could benefit project goals and objectives and that showcase your commitment to the intent of your project ;

14. Be open to new insights and learning as the project unfolds and be willing to incorporate what you have learned in a nimble and flexible manner; and
15. Find ways to sustain the impact of your project following its completion, for example, through an existing network or a coalition.

References

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Building Cross-Cultural Competency

Background

As AODA Partnership Coordinators, we meet and develop relationships with small and medium sized business organizations on a daily basis in our multicultural province. In

2015, the Canadian economy totaled 1.17 million employer businesses according to Statistics Canada. Of these, 1.14 million **(97.9 percent)**

were small businesses with **Ontario having the highest number of small businesses** at slightly over 407 thousand businesses.

“Studying culture without experiencing culture shock is like practicing swimming without experiencing water.” – Geert Hofstede

Many of these small businesses are owned and operated by new Canadians and immigrants. As we have conducted outreach to inform small businesses about the AODA, we discovered cross-cultural barriers in communicating with them. The following document provides tips on best practices in cross cultural communication.



What is a Culture? Culture is the “lens” through which one views the world. It is central to what you see, how you make sense of what you see, and how you express yourself. Culture is not inherent, but learned through time. Culture is the basis for self-identity and community which makes it dynamic.

What is Intercultural Communication?

The study and application of knowledge is about “cultural perceptions and symbol systems” of people from different cultures. This communication style refers to making people aware and be able to adopt others’ cultures

when communicating between two or more parties. Evidently, our organizations are now more diverse than ever which is why incorporating cross-cultural competency into the workplace has become very important.

Who is a Cultural Informant?

A cultural informant (CI) is a term used in the field of anthropology used to describe individual(s) from the culture that is being observed to shed light on relevant ethnographic questions. Cultural informants are usually trusted friends, colleagues, and confidantes who know the culture in depth and are willing to communicate in a non-analytic manner. Within our team, all of us are a cultural informant to each other as we can share our knowledge and experience of a certain culture and geographical region.





Importance of Developing Cross Cultural Competency




Globalization is the cross border movement of people, goods and data; bringing a mix of cultures into contact with one another leading to the increase of potential cross cultural communication. The benefits of globalization include:



- Improving the contribution of employees in a diverse workforce
- More job opportunities and talent improvisation

Differences to Consider in Cross Cultural Communication

 Physical distance
 Use of First Names/Titles
 Volume Of speech.
 Use of facial expressions

 Frequency of eye contact
 Assertiveness
 Use of hands while talking

Geert Hofstede's High & Low Context Culture

Who is Geert Hofstede?

Geert Hofstede is a Dutch social psychologist well known for his research on cross-cultural groups and organizations. Geert Hofstede created a study on how to compare and differentiate cultures based on “high” and “low” context cultures.

High context cultures: These cultures rely on developing close relationships with people over time. They need more time to make decisions and perform transactions. They will never say “no” directly to you because they value and respect your relationship and hesitate to not agree with something that you have said. There are a lot of “read-between-the-lines” scenarios.

Examples of high context cultures:

- 🚩 Japan, China, India, Thailand, and other countries located in Asia
- 🚩 Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and other countries located in South America
- 🚩 Somalia, Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya and other countries located in Africa
- 🚩 Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen and the majority of the Middle East.

Low context cultures: These cultures tend to be individualistic and rely on direct communication with the opposite party. Members of low-context cultures have many relationships that last for a short amount of time or exist for a specific reason. Following procedures and keeping sight of the goal are important in accomplishing any transaction whereas high context cultures do not keep sight of the goal as they prioritize to value their relationships with others instead. In contrast to high context cultures, verbal messages tend to be explicit, direct and concise in low context cultures.



Examples of low context cultures:

- 🚩 Canada and the USA
- 🚩 Germany (very low context)
- 🚩 Australia/New Zealand
- 🚩 United Kingdom/Ireland
- 🚩 Switzerland
- 🚩 Scandinavia

Example E-mails of High and Low Context Cultures:

High Context

Email from Customer:

Hey Support team!

Can you extend our free trial for 1 more week? Great stuff so far, but we haven't had enough time to test everything.

Thanks! Alex

Reply:

Hey Alex!

Sure thing! We're happy to extend your free trial for another week. I'm glad to hear you're enjoying our product so far! :)

Let us know if we can help with anything else!

Amanda Fong
Help Scout Customer Support

Low Context

Email from Customer:

Dear Sir/Madam,

I hope you are well. I am terribly sorry to bother you with this question: our trial period will expire soon, but my managers have not had enough time to see everything yet. If it's not too much trouble, could you please grant us more time? We will be very grateful for your help.

Thank you very much!

Best regards,
Mr. Alex Smith

Reply:

Hello Alex,

It's no trouble at all! We'll be happy to grant you an extension of an additional week. If you need more time after that, please don't hesitate to let us know. We're here to help!

Have a wonderful day!
Amanda Fong
Help Scout Customer Support

The **higher-context** reply starts with a standard greeting, then reuses some of the customer's words to answer their question. It's good to reassure the customer in this case that their questions are welcome, to help establish the relationship.

The **lower-context** reply goes straight to the point with less formality (using "hey" as a greeting, and emoticons).

Both replies are written in a similar tone, but adapted toward the respective customer. The key is to mirror the customer's communication style without overdoing it.

Something to Consider...

Business owners come from various cultural backgrounds with a different outlook towards the concept of “government”. Some business owners in Canada may have dealt with issues from their government in their previous country of residence and have settled in Canada to escape many problems such as violence, war, terror, corrupt governments, political instability, and much more. We have to keep in mind that some business owners will feel uncomfortable if we mention we are educating owners about the AODA as a demand from the Government of Ontario. It is important to be warm, friendly and understanding as well as introducing what the AODA is about in a few sentences. Reassuring business owners that our role is to educate and advocate about the AODA Project and EARN tends to put the owner in a calmer state of mind, as they have been reassured our presence is not to change their business in any way – or create any issues for their business.

Tips to Address Cultural Differences

- ✚ Observe the style, décor, and set up of the business you visit
- ✚ Ask a Cultural Informant (CI) nearby, they tend to have great expertise on a culture you might want to know more about!
- ✚ Observe non-verbal communication such as gesture, tone of voice, physical distance and facial expressions.
- ✚ Be respectful of differences
- ✚ Practice mindfulness
- ✚ Eye contact awareness – certain cultures believe looking into the other person's eyes is disrespectful when conversing.
 - For example, cultures from a high context region such as India, China and the Middle East consider looking directly into someone's eyes in a conversation is too direct, and at times – disrespectful.



- On the other hand, low context culture regions such as Canada and the USA consider direct eye contact to be a sign of respect, and demonstrates that you are engaged in a conversation with the other party.
- ✚ English/French might not be someone's first language. Speak slowly, use simple words, and try to be as precise as possible.
- ✚ If you notice a business owner or employee does not speak English/French, always make sure to ask to speak to someone else who might be operating the business. Ask for a business card or even a phone number of that individual.
 - For example, there will be someone who handles bills, finance or perhaps a younger person for family run businesses.
- ✚ Overall, be genuine!

Appendix B:

Regional Map

