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CREATING ACCESS THROUGH EDUCATION

Workplace accessibility is an ever-evolving, never-ending educational journey for organizational leaders

CLAIRE WILSON

In considering accessibility, organizations in B.C.'s public and private sectors have been examining how the physical spaces they occupy can be made more inclusive of all employees and stakeholders.

As a result, a growing number of business leaders are turning to educational resources to understand what accessibility means for their respective organizations and – ultimately – more light being shed on how fostering greater inclusion through accessibility can create a positive return on investment, according to those who spoke to *BIV*.

When Eric Hopkins took on the role of president and CEO of BCAA, he filled the shoes of a predecessor that “was very focused on the idea of making sure that we broke down as many barriers as possible,” he says.

“Understanding that the elimination of barriers allows us to tap into an even greater talent pool is something I got very passionate about.”

In B.C., 20.5 per cent of the population between the ages of 15 and 64 live with a disability, according to June 2023 data from the provincial government.

“We’d be idiots not to tap into that,” Hopkins says.

“Pragmatically, from a business perspective, it’s such a great pool of talent to tap into.”

For professional services firm EY Canada, diversity and inclusion have been core value from the beginning, according to Kevin Brennan, the firm’s managing partner for the west and B.C.

“The notion began with one of our founders, Arthur Young, who was deaf and had low vision, and continues today as we strive towards providing workplaces that limit barriers and biases, and which foster independence and dignity for our people and clients,” Brennan says.

Research has shown this kind of inclusion is good for business in a number of ways.

A 2018 paper in the *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation* analyzed research across 39 studies and found that the benefits of hiring people with disabilities include improvements in profitability, employee reliability, punctuality, employee loyalty and company image – all in addition to the advantages that stem from fostering an inclusive work culture and from raising ability awareness.

Since September 2022, 750 public sector organizations in B.C. have been required establish accessibility plans in accordance with the Accessible British Columbia regulations. They must each also create an accessibility committee and a feedback tool to collect concerns about accessibility.

Thus far, organizations such as the British Columbia Institute of Technology, Independent Schools Association of

BC and Central Okanagan Public Schools – among others – have created plans, committees and feedback pathways.

“The Accessible BC Act is touching the public sector today and we want to proactively in the private sector be doing the same things and to measure ourselves,” says Hopkins.

An organization that has been on the leading edge of innovation and education in the area of accessibility is the Rick Hansen Foundation, a registered Canadian charity that breaks down barriers for people with disabilities.

Among their resources are awareness programs to educate students and the general public, spinal cord research and accessibility programs that help identify physical barriers in public places and spaces.

They also have the Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification (RHFAC) program, a LEED-style rating system – the first of its kind in Canada – that determines the accessibility of commercial, institutional and multi-unit residential buildings, according to the foundation.

Certified buildings in Metro Vancouver include multiple BCAA offices, the offices of software company SAP Labs Canada, the BC Hydro office building on Dunsmuir Street in Vancouver and Bentall Centre.

Hopkins says that other learning tools can be found through AccessibleEmployers.ca, an initiative by business network Presidents Group.

ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION AS A NEVER-ENDING JOURNEY

One of the key starting points to educating oneself on accessibility is to listen, according to those who spoke to *BIV*.

“We should never forget or ignore having those authentic conversations, talking to the people in your organization who are doing great work and operating with disabilities, being humble and asking, ‘What can we do better? How can we make it easier for you to be successful?’” says Hopkins.

“Look outward, but also look inward.”

When it comes to learning and education on breaking down barriers to access, much of this lies in understanding one’s assumptions, says Brad McCannell, who is vice-president of access and inclusion at the Rick Hansen Foundation and uses a wheelchair and a service dog on a daily basis.

“The great myth about access is that it’s a yes-or-no

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Eric Hopkins
President and CEO, BCAA

question. It's accessible or it's not. That's not true. 'Accessible to who?' is always the question," he says.

"You have to know who people with disabilities really are and – spoiler alert – it's not about a few wheelchair guys."

A major assumption many have when it comes to creating accessible office spaces is that doing so is expensive, McCannell says.

A 2020 study by Vancouver-based HCMA Architecture + Design and the Rick Hansen Foundation demonstrated that achieving the foundation's highest level of accessibility certification – Accessibility Certified Gold – is estimated to add one per cent of total construction costs required to meet Canada's National Building Code.

"In reality, the investment dollar-wise is small but the return is huge. You're able to tap into 20 per cent more of the population who are talented and hungry to work," Hopkins says.

Another major point of learning for Hopkins was understanding that creating an accessible office is not just about the big-ticket items.

He described a moment when the Man In Motion himself visited BCAA offices. Rick Hansen, who was paralyzed from the waist down in a car accident in 1973, has won 19 wheelchair marathons, three world titles and 15 medals, has raised millions of dollars for spinal cord injury research and is an internationally recognized champion for inclusion and accessibility.

"Rick said, 'I'd love to have this meeting out on the deck, but you've got a step and there's no way for a wheelchair to go across that.' It was a really good slap in the face to say, 'Hey, it's the little things that matter,'" Hopkins recalls.

"We see that in totality. The adaptations that we make are everything from sound and lighting, ramps and accessibility to individual accommodations."

At EY Canada, office spaces are made more accessible through a variety of seating options, pod seating that helps to remove visual distractions, lighting that can be adapted for those with photosensitivity and a bring-your-dog-to-work program.

Beyond compliance with Accessibility Standards Canada and B.C. construction guidelines, Brennan says the firm continually makes an effort to listen to what people need and how its spaces can better accommodate a diversity of needs.

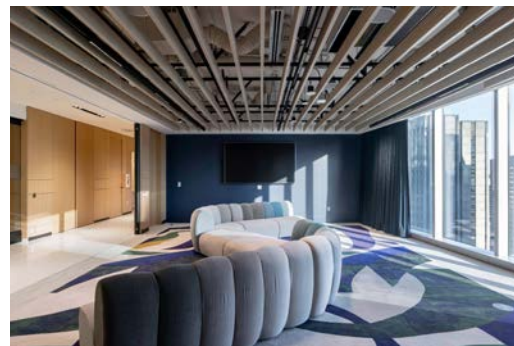
"We're going outside of a one-size-fits-all approach to think about accessibility and inclusive design in layers. For example, wellness rooms and private spaces that may be conducive for people with mobility challenges may also serve as a space to pray, pump breastmilk or administer medications," Brennan said. 🐾



EY offices offer a variety of spaces that are accessible to employees and stakeholders | SUBMITTED



For those sensitive to sounds or smells, EY offers headsets and white noise in open spaces, and has a policy against eating at desks to contain smells | SUBMITTED



EY's office in Vancouver, designed with inclusivity in mind, has sitting, standing and sit-to-stand options | SUBMITTED



The Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification, depicted above, is a rating program that allows property owners to measure and assess the accessibility of their sites | SUBMITTED