



Business and Educational Services in Technology

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Honourable Wayne Easter
Chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance
[pre-budget consultation feedback submission](#)

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Executive Summary

As an innovative [Accessibility Information Technology Specialist entrepreneur](#) living with vision loss, and with more than 30 years of project management, diversity leadership, disability advocacy, with a comprehensive background in software design and development, I have digital communication technology skills and experiences with workplace barriers. As an Appointee to the [Ontario Accessibility Standards Advisory Council](#) and member of some Ontario organizations Advisory Board, I understand the accessibility challenge confronted by Canadian business and blind persons. The challenge for the federal government is to establish an accessibility inclusive vision, with an inter-ministry collaborative strategy, that defines budget commitment and accountability for funding, and engages blind Canadians in an inclusive forum. Please consider the economic budget costs of creating a more **accessible and inclusive** Canada.



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Submission Overview

It is estimated that in Canada, more than 70% of blind adults are unemployed, and about 21% live below the poverty line. This is largely due to the limited access to information. Traditionally we were dependent upon volunteers to read our textbooks, workplace communications, and provide guidance by reading signs and menus. However, we are crossing a new frontier in the evolution of computing and entering the era of cognitive systems. Innovators around the world are pushing the boundaries of science and technology to create machines that sense, learn, reason, and interact with people in new ways to provide insight and advice.

We are moving toward a global digital economy by seamlessly integrating machines and people, where the Internet Of Things is offering greater independence for people with disabilities, through smart devices. However, the ability to use new emerging technologies is currently at the heart of social inclusion, with those excluded being left out of many work, entertainment, communication, healthcare and social benefits. Connectivity to the internet provides opportunities to learn and share, but the graphical websites and high data network costs are a barrier to blind Canadians. The digital revolution can break the cycle of poverty for blind Canadians, only if there is an open and inclusive dialog between government and Canadians living with vision loss, a collaborative effort between government ministries to define accessibility standards and funding requirements, an accountability process to evaluate government funded disability services, and a public feedback mechanism to support government reporting for transparency.

To ensure that the Government delivers on its commitments, [Budget 2016: Chapter 7 - Open and Transparent Government](#) outlines expenditure strategies that will enforce greater accountability, transparency, and collaboration. However, it is disappointing to see that disability challenges in Canadian society are not a priority in the budgeting requirements. It is assumed that each Ministry will consider disability barriers and develop accessibility strategies. Unfortunately, it is this type of broken and fragmented strategy that has frustrated disabled Canadians and locked blind Canadians in a cycle of poverty. Accessibility in a digital economy is not about disability, but more about enabling people to be productive and active participants in a prosperous society. Building a diverse and inclusive society is a journey not a destination, and requires a long term Transformational Strategy.

[The Government of Canada Service](#) and [Investing in Government Information Technology](#) budget strategies, do not identify any commitment to ensure that accessibility inclusion is an integrated component. To date, without a clearly defined government accessibility vision, budget allocations have minimized the efforts in closing disability barriers. The Ministries of [Innovation, Science and Economic Development](#), [Infrastructure and Communities](#), [Employment, Workforce Development and Labour](#), [Transport Canada](#), and [Small Business and Tourism](#), play a prominent role in nation building, and must have an unified accessibility vision. [The Ministry of Sport and Persons with Disabilities](#) cannot strategize in isolation from the rest of government.



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Accessibility Issues

The priorities of the Canada's Economic Action Plan over the past several years, have been to create jobs, lower taxes, and balance the budget. However, the persistent high unemployment rate for Canadians living with vision loss clearly indicates that this plan has failed to improve the lives of blind Canadians.

1. The provincial Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities (LMAPDs) and the [federal Opportunities Fund](#) programs, have more barriers and benefits for persons living with vision loss. The government funding appears to benefit the service organizations more than disabled individuals. The program focus is on providing agencies with better resources and training to prepare individuals for employment, provide effective employment supports, and reach out to employers to develop new job opportunities, but does not consider the digital communication assistive technology needs of blind persons. Entrepreneurs living with vision loss cannot get the assistance they need to compete in the Canadian marketplace, and the lack of funding accountability has minimized the value of services in meeting real life needs.
2. The Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for People with Disabilities in 2013 Report [Re-Thinking disAbility in the Private Sector](#), and the resulting Budget Commitments, focused on physical barriers and did not represent the digital communication needs of skilled blind Canadians, seeking employment. Access to enterprise collaboration communication systems and real-time information mobile navigation information, are two key societal barriers for Canadians living with vision loss. The consultation process excluded direct engagement with blind persons.
3. The Economic Action Plan 2015 introduced a [new Home Accessibility Tax Credit](#) for persons with disabilities and seniors to help with the costs of ensuring their homes remain safe, secure and accessible. However, the Home Accessibility Tax Credit discriminated against blind Canadians, as home digital communication aids were not included. Home appliances, digital thermostats, home security and entertainment systems that integrate speech/braille technologies are essential for Canadians living with vision loss. Government funded programs have not provided leadership in digital accessibility inclusion.



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4. [In Budget 2016](#), the Government will implement an historic plan to invest more than \$120 billion in infrastructure over 10 years, to better meet the needs of Canadians and better position Canada's economy for the future. However, inclusive digital information communication infrastructure strategies appear not to be a concern in this budget. Investing in infrastructure creates good well-paying jobs that can help the middle class grow and prosper today, but will continue to marginalize Canadians with vision loss without considering the needs of the digital age. Education, health, transportation, and commercial enterprise services must integrate accessibility standards into their digital communication infrastructures.
5. The Ontario [AODA](#) legislation requires that employers accommodate employees with disabilities, but there is no provision to accommodate self-employed entrepreneurs with disabilities. The Ontario's AODA Accessibility Action Plan [Path To 2025](#) provides resources and incentives to employers in hiring disabled persons, but ignores the needs of disabled self-employed entrepreneurs. Accountability in the management of program funds for persons with disabilities must ensure that the needs of blind persons are being met. The federal government has not taken leadership in creating a Canadian inclusive digital communication vision, and has not taken responsibility for government funded disability programs outcomes.

Recommendations

A) What federal measures would help Canadians generally?

1. As we transition to a digital economy, it is critical that government leaders understand the importance for digital communication standards for greater inclusion and productivity. Create a culture shift of acceptance and positive attitude toward inclusive digital technologies.
2. The benefits of modern technologies enjoyed by mainstream society today, has its roots in the research and development of innovative life changing solutions for disabled people. Create a collaborative environment to integrate accessibility standards into all processes, procedures and best practices, for greater government inclusion and efficiencies.
3. Innovation, driven by consumer demand, for miniaturization, wireless and cloud sourcing technologies has marginalized blind Canadians from participating in modern society. Establish the federal government as a global leader, by setting product and service standards, and accessibility legislation.
4. Critical factors to implement a Transformational Strategy of best practices require; informed and committed leadership, government-wide alignment and coordination, strong governance and accountability, and processes for measurement, evaluation and reporting.



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5. Currently the consultation communication platform for the [Innovation, Science and Economic Development interactive website](#), and [Transport Canada, the future of transportation interactive website](#) is not accessible to blind speech/braille screen reader users. The gap of understanding in digital communication technologies must be closed in order to be a fully inclusive consultation process.

B) What federal actions would assist Canada's businesses?

1. Mandate the Ministry of Sport and Persons with Disabilities to define a Canadian Accessibility Strategic Road Map That outlines a Multi-year plan, to describe goals and commitments, and create a vision of what success will look like. Accessibility is a powerful strategy in bringing people together to improves communications, and ultimately increases the Canadian global competitive advantage.
2. Assign, within the Ministry of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, a Chief Accessibility Officer to serve as a Ministry liaison to be accountable for the development and execution of accessibility strategies, providing leadership and expertise across Ministries.
3. Assign, for each Ministry, a Ministry Executive Champion of Accessibility to be accountable for implementing accessibility standards, coordinates accessibility efforts, and reports Ministry compliance. Each ministry must develops and implement an annual accessibility plan that includes initiatives to increase accessibility in the work environment, and to reduce and remove barriers. The plans must be made publicly available to ensure that our leaders are accountable for promoting accessibility.
4. Mandate the Ministry of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, to take on the responsibility of setting criteria for a more inclusive partnership between innovators, disability community, and business opportunities. Disabled professionals are creative and persistent when confronted with a challenge, and should be active participants in the design and development of emerging technologies.
5. Mandate the Ministry of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, to develop an employment strategy that supports disabled persons directly, rather than through service agencies and businesses. Increasingly, entrepreneurs are creating economic growth, but those living with disabilities must benefit from the employment support programs. Innovative technologies, like smart mobile devices, are of little value if those that need it do not have the purchasing power to take advantage of it. Canadian organizations with inaccessible enterprise digital communication infrastructures need more than accommodation supports to create meaningful employment for blind persons.



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6. Legislate an accessibility product and service standard. A digital economy will level the playing field for greater inclusion, only if legislative standards are recognized and funding is provided to kick start emerging technology innovations. This is a key growth sector for investors, where Canada has the skills to attract international investment to keep Canada at the leading edge of the digital economy. It is critical that transportation services integrate accessibility standards into their digital communication infrastructure.
7. Establish an Accessibility Leadership Council, of Ministry accessibility champions, to provide strategic advice in helping the federal government achieve the Canadian vision of full inclusion. The Accessibility Leadership Council must establish policies and procedures for accessible consultation to obtain feedback on accessibility strategies and implementation of key priorities, so as to provide a critical perspective on the needs of persons with disabilities.
8. Create a Canadian Accessibility Act that encompasses all needs of people with disabilities. Human rights extends beyond the physical barriers in society.

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