Creating a Culture of Accessibility

A CASE STUDY ON HOW FESTIVAL AND EVENT ORGANIZATIONS CAN MOVE FROM ACCESSIBILITY COMPLIANCE TO AN ACCESSIBILTY CULTURE

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Inside Out

This report was written by

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Strategies for Good

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Foreward

Our tagline at Inside Out is Challenging Attitudes and Changing Lives. As an equity driven organization, we take our role as agents for change seriously and recognize that organizational leadership extends well beyond our festival and ripples across our diverse communities. One of our core values that guides our strategic plan is Accessibility: Inside Out is accessible and inclusive: a safe and welcoming space for filmmakers and film fans from around the world. We respect, reflect and celebrate our communities' diversity and strive for inclusion of all persons.

As we pursued a creative idea to establish a toolhouse of accessibility supports for the festival / events sector, we realized the need for an ongoing dialogue, to develop not just tools for inclusion but best practices that would lead to an authentic cultural shift. We don't have all the answers, but we do have a passion for and commitment to doing our work through an accessibility lens and, with this report, a springboard for next steps.

Collaboration and allyship across the arts sector is a key step in creating meaningful change, so I want to recognize the generous contributions of our organizational partners: Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, The Toronto Fringe, Sundance Institute, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Slamdance Film Festival and Anime North. I'd like to thank Kelsey Butt from the Inside Out team whose ambitious thinking was the catalyst for this project, also Steen Starr for leading this project, and a special thanks to our steering committee members Ken Harrower and Michael McNeely. We are grateful for the work of Heather Simpson and Amy Bartlett from Strategies for Good for facilitating and authoring this report. This project was made possible by funding from the federal Investment Readiness Program.

It is our sincere hope that this report will advance the conversation regarding Accessibility and Inclusion and serve as motivation and inspiration for our colleagues and fellow organizations and festivals across the cultural sector.

Lauren Howes
Executive Director, Inside Out

A note from Project Coordinator Steen Starr

The bitter sting of an exclusionary moment is familiar to many. Say an 2LGBTQ+ person joins a new sports team, attends a new class, or is introduced to someone's relatives at a wedding – you're laughing and talking like you're all just individuals thrown together in this new circumstance, until someone makes a homophobic joke.

In the crack of a smile, a knowing snigger, you've disappeared. Or you're still there but not wanted. You're someone that nobody in this new group can fathom having as an acquaintance, even as the plus one of some distant cousin.

Inaccessibility is comprised of such exclusionary moments, over and over. You attend the foreign film programs because at least they have subtitles until characters start speaking English and the subtitles disappear. You're the actor who played the lead role in the film that won Best Short but you can't physically enter the awards party venue. You're at the airport ready to board a flight to a festival where your work is screening but the airline says people like you can't fly without a companion. Your film team arrives at the world premiere of your documentary but the accessible seats in the cinema aren't configured for group seating.

No one expected you to be there.

Changing approaches to accessibility means changing the expectation of who will be in the audience and who will be the creators. It means changing these expectations from the start, so they are incorporated into planning and content and outreach and delivery and follow up. It means changing the expectation of whose feedback is sought and which suggestions for improvement are implemented.

This Case Study on Creating a Culture of Accessibility offers useful insights and practical take-aways for the evolution of expectations, individually and organizationally. Expectations can be hard to unravel; sometimes it's difficult to know where to start. We offer this report as one part of the larger conversation on increasing accessibility across the broad sector of festivals and events.

We offer this report as some considerations towards ensuring each and every guest feels expected.

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Introduction

Project Background

Whether it is a film festival, a symphony concert or a conference celebrating anime and manga— one of the joys of having an artistic passion is being able to enjoy that art in community with others. Accessibility is at the heart of making sure everyone has equal opportunity to experience that joy.

The impetus for this report stemmed from a study to explore the viability of a social enterprise – an "Accessibility Toolhouse" – that would supply accessibility related equipment and services to Toronto area events, large and small, for-profit and non-profit. Research into the market demand for this service was funded by the Government of Canada's Investment Readiness Program. The research quickly uncovered that festival and event organizers were either unwilling to spend for these supports or were already engaged in the work and not in need of an additional supplier. It became clear that the envisioned social enterprise was not viable, even while there is still much work to be done to improve accessibility at events.

However, we were intrigued by the polarized responses – from those incorporating accessibility as a matter of course to those who could not envision embracing the expense of an accessibility service. We wanted to further explore how organizations move along the spectrum, from focusing solely on the financial or legal implications of accessibility to a place of integrating accessibility into how and why they do their work. We describe this latter position as having "a culture of accessibility". Recognizing that creating culture is about much more than following a compliance checklist, we wanted to better understand how some festivals and events have established a culture of accessibility in their organizations.

To clarify, when we talk about accessibility in this report, we are referring to the accessibility needs of and accommodations for people living with disabilities (PLWD)[1]. We recognize that disability and accessibility are intersectional issues and that several of the case study participants had broader definitions of accessibility. However, for the purposes of this report we have not explored the intersectional issues of race, gender, income, etc., in a meaningful way.

To better understand the process of building a culture of accessibility within an organization running a festival or event, we spoke with several event organizers who have been working to improve the accessibility of their festival or event. Individual case studies are interspersed throughout this report, which begins with an exploration of the motivations for doing better, attempting to

[1] The term people living with disabilities (PLWD) is used in this report according to the United Nations definition which applies to "all persons with disabilities including those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers, hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."

understand why organizations take that initial step to move beyond compliance when many others don't. We then explore the kinds of things organizations relied on to get started on a new path towards building a more accessible and inclusive experience for their audience or patrons, with a focus on identifying the organizational infrastructure and resources that needed to be in place. We also explore how case study participants were able to deepen their accessibility work and begin to establish a "culture of accessibility" within their organizations. We end this report by summarizing some of the key lessons learned from the case study participants in the hopes that their experiences working to build a culture of accessibility in their own organizations and events can inspire and support others hoping to do likewise.

It is clear that, while there remains a long way to go, small initial steps can make a big difference to ensuring an event is inclusive as possible of anyone who wants to attend or participate.

Methodology

This report incorporates findings from a series of 6 long-form interviews with 9 individuals representing[2]:

- 4 Toronto-based organizers
- 4 festivals
- 3 film festivals
- 2 other event organizers
- 2 international organizers
- 6 non-profit organizations

Organizations were selected based on anecdotal recommendations from fellow festival organizers and/or PLWD who identified them as having a reputation for doing accessibility 'better' in one or more aspects of their event. None are doing everything perfectly or without critique, but the intent of our research was to create a series of case studies profiling examples of good practice while also creating a consolidated report that aims to identify common practices and lessons learned across the profiled organizations.

A small project steering committee of Inside Out contract staff and accessibility advocates/ consultants reviewed the preliminary results of our research and helped to interpret the findings for the report. The final report incorporates their inputs as well as those of the case study participants who were provided with an opportunity to review the report draft.

How this Report is Organized

This report is structured around three key questions:

1. Where does the motivation to do better with regards to accessibility come from?
2. What supports and organizational infrastructure are needed to get started? and,
3. How can organizations work to establish a culture of accessibility?

Each section of the report presents consolidated findings from case study interviews and concludes by highlighting key take-aways. Interspersed throughout the report are full-page case study profiles of each of the participating organizations. The report ends with a summary of the key findings as well as a list of recommended discussion questions to support organizations in beginning to reflect on their approach to accessibility.

[2] Some organizations are counted in more than one category.

What this report is and isn't

First and foremost, readers of this report need to be conscious that while members of the disability community[3] were involved at all stages of this project, the report was researched and written by two non-disabled[4] management consultants, who spoke almost exclusively with non-disabled festival and event organizers. As a result, the report centers the voices of non-disabled festival and event organizers rather than the voices of the disability community.

Second, the writers of this report are not accessibility experts and the report does not contain advice or guidance from the disability community itself. The report is not an endorsement of the practices outlined in the case studies nor should it be seen as a best practice guide for what to do. While there are indeed concrete guidelines for accessibility compliance in most jurisdictions (e.g., the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)), those guidelines should be considered minimum requirements. The intent of this report is to serve as a springboard for conversation amongst non-disabled festival and event organizers, as well as between these organizers and the disability community, to improve accessibility for all.

Because this report is focused less on tactical approaches and more on the motivations and necessary infrastructure and resources to support the creation of a culture of accessibility, the foregrounded voices are those of organization staff or volunteers. One of the core conclusions we draw in this report is that for organizations 'do better' when it comes to accessibility, non-disabled staff need to 'do the work' to build their understanding and change their definition of what accessibility means.

There is a long way to go in the journey towards true accessibility, accommodation and inclusion. Across the board, case study participants identified that they want to be doing more. While there are no cookie-cutter solutions to building a culture of accessibility within an organization, there are common practices and lessons learned that can help support those wanting to do better. It is hoped that the experiences of case study participants outlined in this report can serve as inspiration leading to increased accessibility of festivals and events.

[3] While we use the term 'disability community' or 'disability communities' throughout this report as an umbrella term to refer to broadly to people who experience living with a disability, it is important for the reader to recognize that there is no one cohesive or unified 'disability community'. There are as many needs, abilities, preferences, intersectionalities and opinions as there are individuals. In other words, there is a deeper complexity inherent in the otherwise generalized term of 'disability community'.

[4] The term 'able-bodied' is commonly used in popular discourse; however 'non-disabled' was expressed as a preference by our review committee, referring simply to the opposite of disabled without any implication that people with disabilities do not have the ability to use their bodies.

Embracing the Complex Landscape of Accessibility

Accessibility falls within a broader context of inclusion and equity work happening in a multitude of ways, in a variety of contexts. Therefore, as you read this report, we encourage you to keep the following in mind:

- A respect for human rights is at the heart of inclusion and equity work. And so when we are talking about disability communities or PLWD, we are talking about individual human beings with their own experiences, needs, passions and contributions, as opposed to one amorphous, monolithic entity. As one steering committee member pointed out, "*Everyone with a disability is different, and we can't be shoehorned into being one way. If you are a PLWD trying to access a space, all it takes is a 'No' for you to disappear. It is not like you chose to leave, you had no choice. You no longer matter or exist for the purposes of that space.*"
- There are parallel insights from the conversations about race and racism happening across the country and around the world, particularly when it comes to the need for non-racialized / non-disabled people to do their own work (so it is not the sole responsibility of those with lived experience). There are also parallels in-terms of how white/non-disabled people need to grapple with their own fragility when confronted with their failure to live up to their intentions.
- There is a difference between tolerance and inclusion. In our earlier work to explore the market demand for an accessibility focused social enterprise, we heard from many who saw accessibility through a compliance lens, demonstrating a "tolerance" of the need to provide what is required by law. This is quite different from an inclusive approach to accessibility, which instead meets people where they are, embraces the complexity of human experience, and in so doing seeks to understand and create an equitable level of access for everyone.
- Doing accessibility work is a journey, not a destination. As mentioned above, every person living with a disability is different, and their lives are unique. Ensuring accessibility requires consistent questioning, monitoring, learning, communicating, adapting, and growing.

Case Study Profile: Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival

Location	Toronto, Ontario
Website	www.hotdocs.ca
Mission	Hot Docs seeks to advance and celebrate the art of documentary, and to showcase the work of and create production opportunities for documentary filmmakers.
Annual Budget	$9 million (2019)
Number of staff	68
Accessibility Statement	Hot Docs values inclusivity and accessibility for all guests, staff and volunteers. https://www.hotdocs.ca/u/accessibility

"We do have a culture that when there is a challenge around accessibility – we really do put our heads together to figure out if it is achievable, whether we can do it, how we can do it, and how we can do it better next time."

Hot Docs has been on their accessibility journey for about 6 years. They recognized that their response to the primary accessibility complaint they received – lack of captions – really "passed the buck" to the film makers, without taking on any accountability themselves. They felt that they could be doing more and set out to do so. They began paying for film captioning on certain films and requiring films submitted for specific programs to have captions, with a goal to eventually require that filmmakers provide captions for any films shown at the festival.

Their success in captioning enabled Hot Docs to leverage new funding opportunities, which led to looking at other areas of accessibility – relaxed screenings, an accessibility audit of print materials and messaging. This in turn has led to a larger organizational conversation about accessibility.

Hot Docs takes a collaborative approach to addressing accessibility and is looking to put together a 5-year plan that would include an audit of all their processes. Through this collaborative approach, the Hot Docs team is able to have a full dialogue about concerns across all areas of work, to hear different ideas about what can be done and to identify priorities. Hot Docs can see how their thinking has evolved: "Originally it was 'Oh this is a film about deafness – we should reach out to the Deaf community'. Now it's 'Let's bring the Deaf community in because they want to see films.'"

While they acknowledge that there is still lots of work to be done, Hot Docs has made their commitment to accessibility clear in their public messaging. They seek to be proactive, and to let the community hold them accountable. "[We don't] always get it right but being in that paradigm rather than simply responding to concerns – being committed to change – it gives us a different view to work from."

Motivations

"I think the seeds of accessibility have always been really focused on the experience of our audience."

So where does the motivation to do accessibility "well" or "better" come from? We asked this question of all case study participants in two parts: first, we explored why accessibility is important to them (individually and/or organizationally) and second, we asked what had motivated them to dig in and start making real changes. What we heard was that while concepts such as mission alignment and audience development were important, the real motivation to deepen their accessibility work was much more values-driven and personal.

Each of our case study participants indicated they started by reflecting on their values and pointed to the fact that there was a realization and/or acceptance that accessibility was core to the nature of the work of the organization. Whether it be from the perspective of representation, democratic values or building audience, across the board case study participants clearly saw the importance of addressing accessibility and its intrinsic connection to their organizational mission, vision, and values.

At the same time, three of the case study participants clearly indicated that the drive to improve accessibility in their organization came from personal experience. For example, participants cited personal relationships with friends and family who faced accessibility challenges, or personal experiences that had given them a new perspective on accessibility. The implications of this observation are mixed, but it points to the importance of constructive interaction, engagement and building relationships with the disability community and PLWD[5].

"My friend just humanized accessibility so much for me – for the individual to be able to attend and participate with dignity and independence. It's a bit like seeing the end of your nose, that's a no brainer. Of course, everyone wants to feel that way, we want everyone to feel that way."

Other participants indicated that the motivations for their organization to take the work of accessibility more seriously stemmed from artists themselves – both by doing more work with artists with disabilities, as well as with non-disabled artists who wanted to engage audiences in different and more inclusive ways. For example, case study participants shared how working with artists with disabilities had really forced their organizations to

[5] Our steering committee raised concerns about the approach of finding motivation from the lived experiences of people with disability, pointing out that "*The evangelical model of accessibility can be very daunting for PLWD*" and asking, "*How can we move this forward without putting additional burdens on PLWD?*".

open their eyes about the many barriers to accessibility within their organization — not just in terms of physical access, but in broader, power-sharing ways as well. Others explained how non-disabled artists and other internal individual advocates acted as allies and had been important to pushing the "do better" work forward.

To get the wheels in motion, two case study participants also mentioned "benchmarking" as a key strategic motivator. Both these organizations spoke of how they were committed to being democratic and representative organizations. One spoke of how they used benchmarking data to see how their audience and artist participation stacked up against that of the general population and against the industry. Clearly seeing that engagement with the disability community was not equitable or representative of the general population, they felt this ran counter to their core values and principles and as a result they increased efforts to engage disability communities.

While often a key motivator for seeking out accessibility consulting supports, it is interesting to note that none of the case study participants identified legal or liability concerns as their primary motivation, and only two identified it as being part of their motivation. This suggests that while legislation is an important motivator for establishing a baseline compliance for accessibility, it is not a key motivator for taking those first bigger steps towards culture change.

We found it particularly interestingly that only one case study participant cited audience feedback and complaints about accessibility as having been an important motivator for moving closer towards a culture of accessibility. This further highlights the importance of relationship building and personal interaction between non-disabled staff and PLWD, rather than relying on service delivery or complaint process interactions.

> *"If you look at the data, you see how few artists with disabilities systemically are able to finish work, let alone have sustainable careers – compared with the community of people with disabilities – you really see the inequity."*

Take Aways

Organizations looking to embark more robustly on their culture of accessibility journey might consider:

- Examining and reflecting on your organizational values, mission and vision to find a strategic and values-based anchor for streamlining this work.
- Reflecting on the lived experiences of friends and family and/or building personal and organizational relationships with disability communities and PLWD, where engagement is focused more broadly on the shared common interest rather than simply on accessibility.
- Creating opportunities to give creative and decision-making power to PLWD.
- Moving beyond being guided by legal obligations and instead using those as a jumping off point to engage PLWD and tailor your event to your audience.

Case Study Profile: Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO)

Location	Toronto, Ontario
Website	www.tso.ca
Mission	The Toronto Symphony Orchestra is committed to serving local and national communities through vibrant performances and expansive educational activities. The TSO offers a wide range of programming that resonates with people of all ages and backgrounds.
Annual Budget	$36 million
Number of staff	60
Accessibility Statement	The Toronto Symphony Orchestra is committed to excellence in serving all patrons including people with disabilities. https://www.tso.ca/special-needs-accessibility

The TSO has developed an extensive array of resources and support over the years within their patron services team. More recently their community engagement and education strategy as well as the overall strategic plan has broadened their work around accessibility, with a commitment to exploring how they can address a wide variety of accessibility barriers to bring the TSO experience to new communities.

One area of particular focus for the community engagement and education team has been relaxed performances and this is seen a turning point in terms of how the organization addresses accessibility. The conductor and the musicians really engaged in the relaxed performances, and the organization has been on a journey to re-envision what the role of an orchestral musician is. The lessons learned from this experience served to help them develop programming during the COVID-19 pandemic which paired seniors with a single musician for music and conversation. They have found that the collaborative approach to addressing accessibility through a joint effort between the musicians and staff has generated more buy-in and overall commitment to the process.

"One of the musicians talks about when they did their first relaxed performance and saw a child dancing in the aisle, they saw total joy, and in that moment really understood the value of the concert."

Guided by a clear strategy document, spurred by internal advocates and informed by a strong network of allies, the TSO is taking deliberate steps to ensure that accessibility is intentionally part of their programming, and part of their outreach. What started as a relaxed performance for kids and families has turned into a regular series expanded to different ages, and is expanding into mainstream audiences.

Case Study Profile: The Toronto Fringe

Location	Toronto, Ontario
Website	www.fringetoronto.com
Mission	The Toronto Fringe is a platform for everyone to access, discover, and experiment with the arts. By valuing creative experiences, Toronto Fringe contributes to a healthy arts economy and, ultimately, a thriving society.
Annual Budget	$2 million (2019)
Number of staff	5
Accessibility Statement	The Toronto Fringe has made a commitment to establishing and prioritizing accessibility in all areas of our organization. The Toronto Fringe Accessibility Manifesto is available at https://fringetoronto.com/accessibility/manifesto

While the Toronto Fringe is not an accessibility-led organization, "Access – in every sense of the word" has become one of the organization's core values. The organization's deeper dive into accessibility work began about 4 years ago with the goal of embedding access into the organization, so that it is part of everything they do, rather than an add-on.

Toronto Fringe was quick to point out that moving the organization to where they want to be takes time. They have made mistakes but are pleased with the fact that accessibility is a regular part of their conversations. Their work started with a project focused on how to develop an audience to include more people living with disabilities (with an initial focus on physical accessibility and the Deaf community). This led to questions about how the Toronto Fringe could bring artists with accessibility needs into the festival as well as broader conversations about what it means to be accessible. They approached the work through a detailed workplan that changed as they moved forward but served to keep them on track. It eventually led to the creation of the Toronto Fringe Accessibility Manifesto, a public document that speaks to what they have done, what they are doing and what they plan to do to increase accessibility, and holds Toronto Fringe accountable for doing so.

"We are a really small team. We are learning all the time and implementing things as quickly as possible. We could probably list a thousand shoe-drop and ah-ha moments, where we thought to ourselves, 'We can do that, that's not hard'."

The training for festival staff and volunteers at Toronto Fringe is focused less on the mechanics of accessibility (although that is an important component) and more on the value of accessibility and why the festival places so much importance on it. Team members are encouraged to put themselves in someone else's place to consider the experience from their perspective. Additionally, accessibility is discussed on a continual basis and front-line managers work directly with an Accessibility Manager.

What is needed to do better?

Case study participants were asked about what they did to get started once they had found the motivation to improve the accessibility of their festival or event. We were interested in understanding what organizational infrastructure and resources needed to be in place, as lack of infrastructure or resources is a commonly cited barrier to doing more.

Perhaps the strongest sentiment expressed by case study participants was that they just got started. They didn't need extensive analysis or a fulsome strategy before taking steps to do better; they could acknowledge there was a clear need to do things differently, that there were human beings waiting for them to improve, and that they had to begin addressing the things they had the resources and capacity to address, knowing it was going to be a learning journey not a destination.

As previously mentioned, all six participating organizations made a point of expressing that, while perhaps they were doing some good work around accessibility, they definitely felt they could be doing more. This isn't to say they weren't proud of their work but that the work is getting deeper year after year. What groups had in common was a humility about this work, and an understanding that they weren't going to be perfect.

> *"We didn't have a budget, we just figured it out – there was a commitment to the organization to make [our programming] as accessible as possible. The organization would always find the money – but there was a commitment to move from compliance to inclusion – to do everything possible within our means."*

We were surprised by the fact that while all case study participants mentioned that funding was important, not a single one identified budget as having been their primary consideration when starting this work in earnest. It was clear from our conversations that, according to participants, doing accessibility well isn't about money, it's about attitude and putting people first. By listening and getting clear on the actual needs of PLWD, there is a lot that can be accomplished without a huge financial investment.

Often, when the whole organization is invested in accessibility, money can be found when people really want to find it. This is an important insight, since a lack of funding is one of the primary reasons organizations cited in our original feasibility study for not being able to invest in accessibility supports.

It is also interesting to note that several case study participants indicated that they were able to leverage past good work around accessibility to fund future projects – through grant writing efforts or by tying accessibility solutions to other issues or incorporating it early into the planning of activities, allowing funds for accessibility to be transferred from or incorporated into other budget lines.

"The great thing in our culture is that everyone is willing to see how we can make it work within our means."

While budget was less of an issue than we anticipated for those getting started on their accessibility journey, what was more important was the internal support and organizational commitment to accessibility. Three organizations cited the importance of internal support for prioritizing accessibility: from staff members (and not just staff with accessibility in their job descriptions), management, and the board of directors. It did not appear to matter where the nucleus of support came from. What was important was that there were at least a few people within the organization who consistently cared about accessibility and were committed to identifying and addressing gaps. These multiple voices were important, both for the organization to hear from multiple people about the issue and for the people who initially cared about accessibility to have others with whom to coordinate and feel like there was a "we" doing this work.

Finally, being able to access accessibility knowledge and expertise was an important dimension of getting accessibility culture change off the ground. Three organizations cited the importance of accessing outside groups or consultants who were experts in accessibility to provide perspective and supports including training, scenario-planning, and audit services. This was one of the key areas where case study participants identified they were working directly with disabled individuals.

Organizations did this in different ways: some through existing relationships and/or PLWD volunteering their time and expertise (for which we strongly suggest organizations consider paying, if even a small honorarium or discounted/ free tickets to the event); others through partnerships with nonprofit organizations dedicated to addressing accessibility; others through paid accessibility consultants.

Take Aways

Organizations and individuals looking to ensure that they have the necessary organizational infrastructure and resources in place as they move forward on their journey should remember:

- Just get started. You do not need everything in place right from the beginning. You are not going to be able to do everything and you are going to make mistakes, but doing accessibility better is a journey and it starts with a first step.
- Money is not the problem. Attitude is much more important. If the commitment is made, solutions can be found.
- Find your allies and champions and work together to bring others along.
- Specialized expertise is needed. Start the conversation internally, but bring in external perspectives, expertise and support as you go.

Case Study Profile: Sundance Institute

Location	Park City, Utah (with offices in Los Angeles and New York)
Website	www.sundance.org
Mission	Sundance Institute is dedicated to the discovery and development of independent artists and audiences. Through its programs, the Institute seeks to discover, support, and inspire independent film, media, and theatre artists from the United States and around the world, and to introduce audiences to their new work.
Annual Budget	$50 million (2019)
Number of staff	165+ year-round employees
Sundance Film Festival Accessibility Statement	Inclusion is a core value at Sundance Institute, and we are deeply committed to serving artists and audiences from all communities through all our programs, including the Sundance Film Festival. We seek to ensure that all events are accessible for everyone who attends. This is an ongoing effort, and we welcome your feedback so that we can continually improve our services and create the most inclusive experience possible. https://www.sundance.org/mobile-pages/ada

The Sundance Institute has a long history of working to support historically marginalized communities. About four years ago they began to look at accessibility for the disability community with renewed focus and commitment.

Their work in this area is guided by their commitment to serving artists and audiences in their entirety. They regularly review their engagement statistics and industry statistics against that of the overall population to identify gaps. Currently four key communities are the focus of the Sundance Institute's inclusion work: artists of colour, underrepresented gender, LGBT and PLWD.

A key turning point for Sundance was when they started to intentionally increase support to projects with artists who have disabilities. This opened the organization to new learnings and new challenges.

"When we screened Crip Camp, the film team, like other film teams, wanted to sit together. While the theatre was accessible, the accessible seats were all spread out. We had to figure out how to remove seats that were cemented into the ground so there was an accessible seating area big enough that they could watch the film that they had worked on together. This work takes thinking and rethinking, thinking ahead and thinking outside the box."

Today the Sundance Institute is looking to formalize their work in accessibility with the goal of establishing systems and processes and taking a proactive and consultative approach. A next step is to partner further on their work around accessibility to allow for a greater impact.

Case Study Profile: Anime North

Location	Toronto, Ontario
Website	https://www.animenorth.com/event/
Mission	Anime North is an anime convention that celebrates anime, manga, music, games and all other forms of Japanese Culture.
Number of staff	0 (volunteer run/ led)
Accessibility Statement	Anime North believes in providing equal access to the convention for all congoers. We continue to review and update our planning to remove barriers wherever reasonably possible, minimize those that remain and to provide additional help to congoers with physical, mental, sensory or other disabilities, permanent or temporary. This help is provided by Con-AID (Convention Access & Information Department)

With a clearly articulated policy around accessibility and a strong partnership with Con-AID, Anime North's operations have put accessibility at the forefront of their work to help attendees have a positive experience of the festival. As our interviewee highlighted, "We don't get paid – we are all volunteers – so passion is driving all of it … we are here because we want to be here. And we care a LOT about people having a good experience."

This caring underpins Anime North's approach to accessibility and is demonstrated in the way they build policies and practices around making the festival as accessible as possible, taking a human-centered, experience-attentive view. They "*honour people and their requests: we don't immediately go to 'we can't do that/ it's too expensive'. We try to get to the core of what a person's needs are, where the request is coming from. We have a conversation to understand the need and are open to finding creative ways to address that need.*"

Of course, this on-the-ground, responsive, personal touch to accessibility sometimes has a price, and in the case of Anime North, data management and tracking is a goal to improve.

"We need better data management/ tracking, but we are volunteer run/led, so this sort of thing tends to get put to the side—there is so much else to do."

Fundamentally, their success towards building a strong accessibility culture involves a mixture of strong, well-understood policies, robust on-the-ground supports and personal attention, along with a positive, engaged and constructive approach to making their event accessible. "*Accessibility is fun! The technology that is used to provide accommodations is amazing. Inclusion is cool! Don't treat it as a pass-fail situation – if you can't meet someone's needs, it is not a huge failure. Listen, be creative, get excited. Even if you can't meet all of the needs in all of the ways you would like, you are interacting with awesome people doing awesome things in awesome ways, and it is a privilege to create opportunities for people to enjoy each other*."

How to build a "Culture of Accessibility"

After an organization has determined that they are motivated to do better and have taken the first steps to doing so, it is important to look at how to deepen and embed a culture of accessibility within the organization. This move towards a culture shift will support sustainability of the efforts being implemented, ensuring that the work continues even if there are setbacks or when champions of the cause leave the organization.

"To go about creating workplace culture, you don't necessarily know that is what you are doing, but it [accessibility] is centered in our values, has buy-in from leadership, from top down, and it is in training and in our culture and in our policies and procedures, it gets layered in more and more year after year. I think we called it more a value, but it is a culture."

While the organizations we spoke with had varying degrees of accessibility culture ingrained into their approach, none had been deliberate about building a culture and all cited different "tipping points" for when accessibility became something more than compliance. For some case study participants, their tipping point was the result of the implementation of a deliberate strategy, while for others it was establishing stronger accountability measures, and for another it was the realization that accessibility improved dramatically when staff felt enabled to identify and address accessibility concerns themselves. What did emerge from the interviews, however, were a series of common factors that cut across most participants.

First, each of the organizations we talked to has some sort of accessibility strategy (or are in the process of developing one). The strategies come in a variety of different shapes, sizes, forms, and names, but they serve to accomplish two things: (a) to clearly communicate the intent to be accessible and (b) to provide a mechanism around which accountability for this intention could be built.

Having a commitment and a plan allows organizations to move away from being purely reactionary in their response to accessibility. This study's Steering Committee members further emphasized this point and highlighted the *"importance of articulating a real commitment to disability, getting concrete about the values espoused, the concrete services provided, and building a relationship that the disability community can really trust."* It is important to remember that most organizations didn't get started with a strategy in place; that came later and, as was pointed out, for most the strategies were revised and adapted as the journey unfolded and they learned more about the accessibility needs and opportunities of their audiences and stakeholders.

"[We published our strategy] – it allowed people to see what we were doing from the outside, [it] spoke of what we had done, what we were doing and what we planned to do. You can't do everything at once, but with the [strategy] people could see what we were doing and know that we were accountable. We are always balancing and assessing; the [strategy] keeps us accountable and informs people about what we are doing and what resources we have to allocate."

Another commonality amongst the case study participants was disbursed accountability. While some had identified individuals as key points of contact – and it was widely acknowledged that it was vital to have a centralized point of contact and accountability for accessibility during the actual event or festival – overall accessibility was seen as a shared responsibility across the organization. This shared responsibility helps ensure that rather than having someone in the role of accessibility cop, there is dialogue about concerns from all different areas as well as shared learning from the experiences of other departments, and informed processes for setting priorities. This doesn't mean that the knowledge was distributed evenly; there was a recognition of the need for specialized expertise (typically through accessibility consultants).

When it comes to deepening culture, case study participants placed an emphasis on the importance of regular and targeted staff and volunteer training. It was clear that effective staff/ volunteer training wasn't of the one-size fits all or one-and-done variety in the organizations we spoke with. Instead, they spoke of multiple staff-wide meetings and specialized departmental or role-based supports.

One participant spoke of how their staff often volunteered or attended other festivals and events to see how they were managed and how they did accessibility. Others spoke of how accessibility was raised consistently at internal meetings to ensure it was always top of mind and staff could see how others were working to identify issues and come up with solutions. Others pointed to the need for training to be highly focused on the interpersonal components of accessibility rather than the compliance components. Accessibility consultants were often cited as being integral to this work, helping to keep staff (in particular, front-line staff and volunteers) current on preferred language and good practice. This regular and sometimes targeted training was seen to be important not only because it demonstrated to staff that there was real organizational commitment to accessibility but also as it was seen to humanize accessibility for non-disabled staff.

> *"[Training needs to focus on] not the mechanics … but on why we are doing this, it is for the independence and dignity of someone who wants to attend our festival. We encourage our team to put themselves in someone else's place to see how they will experience what they are doing. It seems to shorten the back-and-forth process."*

Another important factor that all organizations we spoke to had in common was a shared attitude of patience, flexibility, and humility. All organizations we spoke with accepted that mistakes would be made and had been made along the way. For example, one organization spoke of how they had in the past posted a volunteer outside the accessible restroom, redirecting anyone who wasn't using a wheelchair to restrooms in another location, until it was pointed out there were other reasons why someone may need an accessible washroom. Another spoke of how they had made an announcement about how they were fully accessible only to have someone document with a video camera how false that statement was with regards to one of the festival venues. This open sharing was presented almost as a source of pride, and these errors were thought of as an indication that progress was being made and learning and growing was happening. The vulnerability of being able to own mistakes and talk about what needs fixing was a relationship-building step as well, acknowledging the lived experience of PLWD and helping build trust between event organizers and the disability community.

Learning to accept criticism well is a process that both individual staff and volunteers, as well as the organization, need to go through and, for many of the individuals we spoke with, it appeared to be a journey they went through personally. It brings to mind the concept of 'white fragility' in the movement for racial justice. In this case, non-disabled people need to learn to accept that, even if their intentions are good and they try their best, it may not be enough. The ability to center the experience of PLWD is not a natural position for most non-disabled individuals; it is cultivated and learned over time and with intention. For example, one participant pointed out that it was through their honest, open and respectful responses to the mistakes they made that they were able to begin to build a stronger relationship of trust with the disability community. PLWD in their community placed value on their response to complaints, their commitment to resolving issues and their efforts to avoid making the same mistake again. Their authenticity about their desire to learn how to do better seems to help foster learning and growth, while simultaneously helping to build trust and relationship with the disability community.

"You can't have an ego. … It feels personal, but you can't take it personally and say, 'Well I tried', or 'I did my best' or any of that - it's like 'I have to accept this and learn from it'. There is a skill in that, as it is very easy to be embarrassed, or ashamed. You need to look at it from the perspective of 'How do I learn from this, how do I swallow my pride, how do I accept this feedback?'"

Take Aways

Organizations looking to establish an ingrained culture of accessibility should recognize:

- They will make mistakes. They will need to park their organizational or individual ego. It isn't about their intentions or what they have done to address accessibility, it is about the experience of the individual in the moment. The organizational muscle needed to respond well to criticism is a muscle that gets built through use.
- The usefulness of a clearly articulated plan with values and commitments.
- The importance of communicating intentions and allowing the community and allies to hold them accountable to those intentions.
- That while policies and procedures are very important, so much of the accessibility experience is tied to individual interactions. There is a need to bring all staff and volunteers along on the journey to deepen the accessibility culture. This can be accomplished through communication, education, and training designed to build human-centered and human-responsive motivations, understanding, and attitude.

Case Study Profile: Slamdance/ Unstoppable

Location	Park City, Utah (Headquartered in Los Angeles, California)
Website	https://slamdance.com/
Mission	The Slamdance Film Festival is a showcase for raw and innovative filmmaking that lives and bleeds by its mantra: By Filmmakers, For Filmmakers.
Number of staff	19

The UnStoppable program (piloted in 2021) is a particular highlight for the Slamdance festival. The festival functions by democratic decision-making and they quickly noticed that, while they had disabled artists and creators participating in the festival, they didn't have enough disabled artists and creators around the decision-making table.

UnStoppable was created as a dedicated programming stream within the Slamdance festival, showcasing the work of disabled artists. Slamdance organizers gave the keys to the program to the disability community, supporting the artists on this creative journey, letting them decide what the program needed and supporting their vision completely.

Initially, Slamdance struggled with the question of whether using a separate program to highlight disabled voices was the right approach. However, the need to focus on disability was clear, and so a first step became the creation of a programming stream completely made up of and led by artists who were PLWD.

The approach attracted a lot of attention for both the Slamdance festival and for UnStoppable and served to give real prominence to the disability artistic/ creator community. Under-represented talent and some incredible films and stories were highlighted and offered to the public via YouTube which increased viewership enormously. "*This program exposed a whole new audience to the work of PLWD artists and paid off well for both the reputation and bottom line of the larger Slamdance festival. … Our accessibility-focused programming has been watched by people from over 100 countries. Opening up the accessibility programming and making it available for free paid dividends both to disabled creators and to the wider festival*."

The intention from the beginning was to be completely open to making mistakes and continuing to pivot and refine this work as they went. Slamdance and Unstoppable organizers were under no illusion that they were going to get it right from the start. Instead, they wanted to take steps to help the film industry better reflect the diversity of society. The festival is committed to listening to the community, and community is complex, diverse and messy. Unstoppable is not perfect. There is lots of room to grow, incorporating more feedback and perspectives from the disability community. But they felt it was the right thing to do when they wanted to start taking steps in the right direction.

"Just try. We didn't set out to be perfect, but we did set out to have meaning and purpose and make an effort to move towards what we thought was important – you have to start somewhere. We made mistakes along the way but we were genuine in our effort to make our first program accessible and the best it could be with the resources we had available. It was this spirit that attracted great support and an enthusiastic and engaged audience, the size of which was astonishing."

Progress and Impact Measurement

A final area of focus for our research was to attempt to understand how organizations were measuring their progress. It became clear that processes for impact measurement and accountability for progress were in their infancy. Most monitoring and evaluation work (when it was being done) was focused on surveys and tracking of audience feedback, staff and volunteer feedback, accessibility complaints and ticket sales. None of the organizations we spoke with had established accessibility indicators or set measurable goals. As a result, impact is not well documented. This is one area where organizations could be well served to work together to establish common indicators and benchmarks.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Building a culture of accessibility is a journey, not a destination. But it is a journey that is vitally important to take. In compiling this report, we were struck by how the motivations for doing better were largely internal or personal, rather than driven by audience feedback or complaints. While collecting and addressing feedback certainly plays a role in getting legal or regulatory issues met, it does not appear to play a big role in shifting organizational attitudes away from compliance towards inclusion. Instead, building real relationships with individuals and community groups by cultivating opportunities for deeper empowerment, engagement and understanding were the key drivers for making more meaningful gains in the accessibility journey.

Another surprising finding was the fact that money is not the primary barrier to accessibility; it's attitude. As we saw with our study on the feasibility of a centralized "Accessibility Toolhouse", as well as from personal and anecdotal experience, organizations frequently cite budget as the main reason for not implementing accessibility accommodations. Yet the case study participants in this report indicate that, while funding was an accelerator for accessibility, money was not the initial spark nor did lack of funds appear to hold organizations back. It is clear again that change comes from attitude, from the belief that accessibility is not only possible, it is important. When the desire is there, the dollars can be found. Even if not all the funding is in place to do everything envisioned, great strides can still be made as much of the work can be done for little to no additional cost with the right planning. It is important to acknowledge that there are costs to this work but, unlike compliance driven groups who see the expense as a pure cost, case study participants saw a return for their expense.

Creating a culture of accessibility needs tactical elements such as a clear strategy, accountability measures, shared responsibility and training. But none of those elements will have an effect if those strategies and training aren't rooted in internal organizational values and personal understanding. Accessibility helps make festivals and events open to everyone and while the voices and experiences of disability communities are key to creating a responsive and sustainable accessibility culture, it is not the sole responsibility of PLWD to ensure their own enjoyment of artistic endeavors. It is the responsibility of non-disabled allies – as members of society, as an arts community, and as human beings – to create inclusive spaces and to continually improve the ways we interact and engage with each other.

We hope that this report provides some insight and inspiration for all festivals and events — regardless of where they are on their accessibility journey — to take that first/next step and continue to learn, engage, create and grow together!

Summary of Key Takeaways

For those festivals and events committed to accessibility who want to start taking some steps towards culture change today:

- Creating a culture of accessibility requires intention, understanding and creativity, not money. What can you do in your organization to move from a scarcity mindset to one of community and abundance?
- Relationships are key to culture building. The development of good practice standards and policies needs to be combined with a human-centered/ human-responsive approach.
- Stop waiting. Just start. Do better. Be open to iteration, making mistakes and learning.
- Accessibility is not just good for PLWD. It is good for festivals and events who are building reputation, community, and fun!
- Information is power. It is important to be willing to fail and grow, but organizations need good data to grow in the right direction. Monitoring, evaluation, and tracking are key to having a finger on the pulse of what is working and what is not, so that accessibility gains can be improved and deepened.
- Seek out informed expertise.

Discussion Questions

Want to begin your journey of building an accessibility culture in your organization? Below are some suggested questions for reflection and discussion.

1. How is accessibility reflected within our organizational values, mission and vision?
2. How are we supporting artists living with disabilities?
3. What are we doing to engage with PLWD as stakeholders, beyond just engaging them about accessibility issues as audience members?
4. In terms of connection and learning from expertise, who is absent from our planning table that could or should be there?
5. What do we do when someone requests an accommodation we don't have?
6. What are we (am I) doing to remove the burden from PLWD to identify accessibility issues and/or solutions?
7. What are some areas of our work where we might be able to enhance accessibility, or save money to allow us to do more, if we thought about accessibility earlier in the design and planning stages?
8. Who within the organization is engaged around accessibility? How can we bring them together?
9. What is something we could do tomorrow to improve the accessibility of our festival/ event?
10. How can we be better at learning from our mistakes and making improvements? How can we better support of staff/volunteers in learning how to respond to criticism or feedback?
11. How are we monitoring and tracking accessibility issues at our festival/ event?
12. Does our internal training around accessibility go beyond checklist items to include interpersonal interaction and human-to-human connections?
13. What could we be doing to communicate our commitment more clearly to disability communities and to the wider public? Are we truthful about our ability to deliver on our commitments?