

AT Banter Podcast Episode 298 - Smart Cities For All


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SPEAKERS


Rob Mineault, Yulia Sarviro, James Thurston, Ryan Fleury


 Rob Mineault 00:20
Hey and welcome to another episode of AT Banter.

 Ryan Fleury 00:24
Banter, banter.

 Rob Mineault 00:26
This is of course the podcast where we talk with advocates and members of the disability community to educate and inspire better conversation about disability. Hey, my name is Rob Mineault and joining me today, Mr. Ryan Fleury.

 Ryan Fleury 00:40
Hello, everyone.

 Rob Mineault 00:42
And yet again, we're a couple, a couple of screws short of, I don't know, a carpentry project, because we do not have Lis Malone or Steve Barclay with us once again this week. But that's okay. Me and Ryan can handle it.



R Ryan Fleury 01:01
Excellent. All right. Let's show them we can handle it.

R Rob Mineault 01:04
Okay, well, let's leap right in. Ryan, then why don't you tell the fine folks at home what the heck we're doing today.

R Ryan Fleury 01:12
All right. So today we have a couple of guests who have joined us - we have James Thurston, who is the vice president of G3CIT Welcome, James.

J James Thurston 01:22
Hello. Good morning.

R Ryan Fleury 01:23
Good morning. And also joining us is Yulia Sarviro, who is the Senior Project Manager of Smart Cities for All. Welcome, Yulia.

Y Yulia Sarviro 01:33
Thank you for having me.

R Ryan Fleury 01:35
Thanks for joining us.

R Rob Mineault 01:37
Yeah, thank you so much. I know you guys are very busy, and I know that we had some some challenges getting all our schedules to line up. So we do really appreciate you guys coming on and talking to us a little bit about smart cities and what you guys are working on with the Smart Cities for All initiative. So maybe we could just start the ball rolling with just explaining to the audience, just what, what is meant by the term smart city?

Y Yulia Sarviro 02:13
Good question. You would think that it's an easy question to answer. But in many ways, it's actually not it. I can kind of explain why that will give you some things to think about smart cities

actually not it, I can kind of explain why that I'll give you now we think about smart cities. Maybe just briefly, first of all, we're an international nonprofit organization that Yulia and I work for, we're focused on technology and the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities around the world. So that's sort of our perspective on all of these issues that we work on. Technology, Accessibility Inclusion. So with cities, there's, I sometimes say there are as many definitions of what a smart city is, as there are smart cities in the world. For us, we sort of let cities opt in, in the work that we do with cities, if they want to call themselves a smart city, because they have a website and a mobile app. We just want to make sure that that website and that mobile app are as accessible as they can be to people with a range of abilities and disabilities. Beyond that we often point to -there's an organization called the Smart Cities Council. And I sometimes use their definition of what a smart city is, for a variety of reasons. One, it's short, but they they define a smart city as a city that is using technology using ICTs to enhance the livability workability and sustainability of that city in the people in that city. I like that again, because it's short. There's a focus on ICTs. But it gets to the human aspect of cities when it talks about livability and workability. And we think that's important that sort of technology to the deployment of technology assets to really support the the inclusion the integration in the full benefit of living in an urban environment for everyone, including people with disabilities.

R

Ryan Fleury 04:07

So what is an ICT?

J

James Thurston 04:10

ICT, sorry, for acronyms is information and communications technology. So it's the range of technologies that we're using right now that we're all using all day long.

R

Rob Mineault 04:21

So really, it sounds like any sort of any city that is using any sort of higher level technology to sort of regulate infrastructure that that it sounds like that can be considered a smart city. It sounds like there's a really large gradient when it comes to identifying as a smart city.

J

James Thurston 04:41

Sure. There is. Maybe we can give you some some examples to make it a little bit more real usually I'll start maybe you can chime in as well. There's certainly cities that are using technology for a bunch of of back end purposes. So you know To understand better and monitor how they're using, how well the electrical grids working and how they're using power across the city, I think we're we're focused on Smart Cities is where there's a human interaction with that technology. For example, I live in Washington, DC, all jokes aside, we are considered a smart city, because of the way that we use technology to support everything that the city does. And if you if you think about cities, big and small, the kinds of services they offer, they are incredibly important to our day to day life. It's transportation and mobility, getting around education, public safety, emergency preparedness, and response. Courts and judicial activities. cities aren't doing all of this kind of activity every day. And they're using technology

increasingly, to provide all those services to support all of those activities. And that's where we get involved in really trying to work with cities to make sure that as they're using technology to support getting around the city to support education, to support public safety, that they're using accessible technologies, technology that will work for everyone. And the example that I often talk about is not a great example, sort of an example of a less accessible smart city. But here in Washington, early on in the COVID pandemic, our city started putting out a COVID dashboard every morning with data on transmission rates, hospitalization rates, how many open beds to wear that day, in hospitals, really useful information, particularly if you think back to the early days of the pandemic, it's a sort of a quintessential, Smart City solution of using technology and data to engage with your your communities in the city. Fantastic. I loved it. I looked at it every morning first thing, but completely not accessible to users who, who had visual disabilities. So in that sense, it was a smart solution, by a definition of a smart city, but inaccessible smart solution.

Y Yulia Sarviro 07:04

It is very important for the smart city, that technology that they use and the technology that they apply and deploy, or interact with. If it is just the website, which just has some information about who is responsible for what in the city, probably you cannot call that city already a smart one. Because this website probably doesn't have the interaction with the citizens. But if the city starts deploying solutions, which are collecting the feedback, for example, promised citizens, for example, about the garbage left on the streets, or that the year a street lighting went off or something like that, then it starts using the Smart Technologies, because this feedback and the data that is gathered this way, starts to inform the decisions that the city makes.

R Ryan Fleury 08:07

One of the questions I have that I think is making this very, very complex, is if you've got a city or a smart city, who is embracing the technology, are there standards in place so that let's say somebody who is visually impaired, they need to access their gas meter, their water meter, their phone, whatever? Like, are they going to need 25 different apps because there's no standards in place for this technology?

J James Thurston 08:43

Great question. Thank you for asking it, because Yulia and I both love talking about technical capability, we really do. And there are standards that exist. There are, in fact, we have smart cities for all a website with a toolkit that's available in 11 languages. One of the tools in that toolkit are the three ICT or technology accessibility standards that every city CIO and IT department need to know about NGOs. And so we in that document in that tool, we talk about the WCAG web accessibility standard that defines what accessible means for websites and to an extent mobile apps. But there's two other even more comprehensive accessibility standards for technology. One is none of these standards have terribly simple names. So there one is called EM3011549 - just rolls off the tongue. That is actually a European standard that is that covers hardware, software technology services, and also web accessibility by embedding the WCAG standard. And there's a standard here in the US where I live called Section 508, which is basically the same as the European and standard EM301549. By design, they're about 95, 96%.

the same I would say. And they really do to the extent possible today define what it means for different kinds of technologies to be accessible for different kinds of disabilities. And so there there is no excuse, I guess I would say, for a city IT department not to be familiar with the standards and to be using them. And a lot of the work that Yulia and I do is, is working with cities, to understand those city those standards for accessibility and use them on a day to day basis. In fact, we just got off a call with the city of Istanbul in Turkey on exactly this topic of these standards and how to use them.

R

Ryan Fleury 10:41

It's interesting, we've had conversations on this show in the past that talk about, you know, my needs, as somebody who's totally blind are different than someone with autism or someone in a wheelchair. So how, how do people or how do cities grasp the concept of making themselves ace or becoming a smart city, when there is so much diversity or differences in the disability community?

J

James Thurston 11:08

So we work with cities in a variety of different ways. One is we've partnered with the the G20, the biggest economies in the world. They have a Smart City Alliance. And they work with the World Economic Forum, we're working with cities with through them that partnership, to adopt procurement policies, basically requirements on themselves as a city to that they will only buy accessible technology as defined by these standards. That's great. And a huge step forward, I would say. But a part of that is you need to check what what you're getting from your vendors, what you're buying, it's one thing to say we you know, it must meet this technical standard for accessibility. But you need user testing, you need including by people with a range of abilities and disabilities. And user needs, even before you go out to buy or develop technology for the city, you're gonna want to get that input. And so we, as part of the work that we do in cities, we also do assessments of cities - how good are you at being both a smart city and an inclusive or accessible city based on a sort of a set of criteria? And one of the things that we look at in that is how are you engaging people with disabilities, your employees with disabilities? How are you engaging them in the digital transformation of the city and the use of technology? But also how are you engaging other communities of people with disabilities in user needs analysis and even testing as you deploy new technology solutions.

R

Ryan Fleury 12:41

And for the most part, the cities have have been embracing that and grasping that concept of engaging the community?

J

James Thurston 12:52

I would say, I've been doing accessibility work for for 20 years, in different positions, seven years here, this nonprofit organization, I think we're in a dramatically different point today than we were even five years ago where I tell folks. I used to spend most of my day just kind of begging people to care about disability and accessibility. I don't have to do that anymore.

People get it, the CIO of the city gets why they should care. They just don't know what to do. So the conversations today are much more around how do I do this? Not why do I need to bother to care about this? Which is obviously a much better place to be. There's still an enormous amount of work to do, to do what I call that the heavy hand holding with cities, on helping them understand exactly what they need to do to make sure that this enormous digital transformation of cities is becoming is not creating a bigger barrier, bigger divide for people with disabilities.

Y Yulia Sarviro 13:57

Right. Just to add here and again, to reiterate, the biggest issue, probably the awareness raising, but not only in the city, because CIO of the city or the mayor of the city might already be on board in terms of accessibility. But also we the year employees of the city and the vendors. And we a couple of years ago, we have a very interesting project dedicated to the inclusive innovation environment to innovation ecosystem. Because many cities are partnering with innovation ecosystem, they are working with startups. They are hosting their incubators for startups to help them come up with the solutions for a city. And the biggest problem there is the awareness raising. And then there's also the capacity building, because even if they realize that accessibility is important, as James said, they don't know what to do next.

R Rob Mineault 15:11

Yeah. And that's, it's really interesting. I mean, I feel like this is a really a common theme over the years, especially in terms of technology, the new technology is developed. And then after the fact, and after it's been implemented, somebody goes, Oh, well, wait a minute, is this is this accessible? And then they have to go back and they have to retool, and and sort of, you know, tack on some sort of accessibility add on. I mean, you know, even even smartphones themselves, I mean, that took several years for all the accessibility features to be built into the, you know, the, whatever was the second or third generation of iPhone. So is that starting to change, because I really see that that as the key, it's got to trickle down to those vendors, to those developers, the idea of universal design. It seems to me that once that happens, we're going to be a lot farther down the road, because then when cities go to the vendors, and they purchase the technology, it's already accessible. So in that sense, are things getting better?

J James Thurston 16:20

They are, I think, and I think one of the biggest drivers that I've seen over the past couple of decades, and in pushing industry, to be better on accessibility, is this procurement. And I should say, Yulia and I both come from the technology, industry, and love technology in the development of technology and innovation. But what we're seeing, because of procurement policies, the US has Section 508, which requires the US federal government to buy only accessible technology, that policy was the first of its kind others like Canada, where I think you guys are based, are moving in that direction as well and have pieces of that kind of policy. We're working with cities to adopt policies that they that require them to buy only accessible technology in countries as well. And when the US federal government adopted it a couple of decades ago, I was working in industry at the time. And we really saw a shift to companies not only innovating around accessibility, to get that business of the US federal government, which

is the biggest consumer of technology in the world. So of course, people are gonna want that business, but they're competing with each other based on the accessibility of their products and services. And so one of the what you'll recall, the kind of low hanging fruit of accessibility policy is working with cities and governments to to get these these procurement policies because it really does push the industry to one be aware of accessibility and how people with disabilities use technology, innovate around that and compete on accessibility. Because if your biggest customers, and typically governments are the biggest customers of technology companies, the biggest single customer, and they're saying accessibility matters to us, then you're going to pay attention. And we've certainly seen that be the case.

R

Rob Mineault 18:14

Yeah, that makes so much sense. I mean, you're basically hitting them, you know, where it hurts, because all it's going to take is to lose one or two contracts, because your product is not accessible for for developers and vendors to really, really take notice.

Y

Yulia Sarviro 18:32

We'de like to make sure that accessibility is taken as seriously as security. If the product does not provide all of the features of privacy and security, people will not be purchased by the city. So we want to see the same, the same focus on accessibility.

R

Rob Mineault 18:56

So, I mean, it must be I mean, when I think about this, I just feel like it must it sounds so daunting, even just on a on a city by city basis, because there's so many moving parts and people. Different cities all over the world are moving into or embracing technology at different rates. This must just feel like a huge game of whack a mole in terms of trying to to help cities manage this. What's it like in terms for you guys? You guys must be working off your feet.

J

James Thurston 19:37

You know, it is a bit like whack a mole and the the challenge or the opportunity, I like to sort of spin it in a more positive way, that the opportunity is gigantic. We're a small, international but small nonprofit organization. I like to say we have a small organization with a big global footprint. The only way we can scale our mission to scale, our impact is through collaborations and partnerships. And so we partner with, with organizations, public sector and private sector organizations, civil society organizations that have a bigger presence on the global stage than we do. So I mentioned we're partnering with the G20 Smart City Alliance in the World Economic Forum, two huge organizations with a lot of reach. And they are helping us bring this message and tools and model policies to cities, around procurement, for example. We partner with companies we do a lot of work with, with companies like Microsoft, who also have a huge global presence who are interested in partnering to bring this message of accessibility and inclusion to more and more governments, both at the national level and sub national or city level as well. So those kinds of collaborations are key, we've done some work in the past, with the World Bank, focused on GovTech and accessible and inclusive Govtech, they put out a great guide for

the governments that they work with around the world, primarily in emerging and adult developing economies. They're all undergoing a digital transformation as well. And they need to understand about accessibility as part of that. So that's how we you know, we sort of get at this whack a mole kind of, of challenge, I guess, is really through these strategic partnerships with with organizations who have global reach in in shared objectives around our mission, which is inclusive and accessible technology.

Y Yulia Sarviro 21:31

We also partner with other organizations, nonprofit organizations, like Worldwide Union. Mark was on your podcast couple of weeks ago. And many others. They are all of membership organizations, and they have members from different countries, different regions of the world. And it is important for us to stay in touch with them and to have them as that is our partners to reach out to different countries. And we also are very likely to have our own network of experts. Our country representatives, we just announced yesterday that we are joined by three more and now we have 14 experts in 40 different countries in the world.

R Ryan Fleury 22:27

And looking at your website, it looks like you've got a lot of large cities, you know LA for example. Do you have an example of a perhaps smaller town or city that has made the digital transfer transformation and and is a true Smart City at this point? Because LA seems huge and daunting.

J James Thurston 22:49

Los Angeles is the second biggest city in the US and the short answer is there certainly are examples of cities small and medium sized cities that are undergoing a digital transformation that are becoming smarter and using technology. We probably to date haven't worked with many of them because our initially in our work with cities we wanted to partner with cities that that could then drive greater interest, frankly, around the world. So cities like Istanbul and Quito, Ecuador and South Paulo, Brazil and Rio and in Los Angeles in New York. That being said, interestingly, we are now I think at the point where we're interested in trying to migrate these messages and tools to to smaller and medium sized cities as well. In not that long ago, I've started some conversations around that even with some of the smaller and medium sized Canadian cities, also in other countries as well. We absolutely do want to reach cities of all size. Most of humanity lives in a city, as do most people with disabilities. And so we want to make sure that that as all of these cities are undergoing this digital transformation that they are all no matter what the size of the city that they're they're thinking about accessibility on the front end, not on the back end. We've done some work with Raleigh, North Carolina, did an assessment of them. That is a I wouldn't call it a small city but a medium sized city for the US, I would say. I think they were about 500,000 people at the time.

R Ryan Fleury 24:27

Can you can you explain a little bit more in detail how they've become a smart city and what maybe what work still needs to be done to push them over the finish line?

maybe what work still needs to be done to push them over the finish line.

J

James Thurston 24:39

So with with with Raleigh, they actually had a pretty sophisticated digital strategy as do a lot of small and medium sized cities. I would say it again, for us we really do let cities opt in to defining themselves as smart. You know, all of them are using technologies for these key services that they provide. In Raleigh, the work that we did with them was an assessment. So we sort of looked at, you guys are undergoing a pretty comprehensive digital transformation across all of your departments, you're investing a lot in technology. What we did was go and look at their systems and processes and say, as you're doing this, as you're buying technology, deploying technology, are those assets accessible? How do you know if they're accessible? What do you do when they're not accessible? What's the role of the leadership in the city and driving a greater focus on accessibility inclusion? As you pointed out, how are you engaging people with disabilities as part of this, and then gave them a set of recommendations to improve, but I think you'd be hard pressed, frankly, to find any city, small, medium, or large in any geography, that is not using technology to some extent. And again, critically important in the work that we do is with the cities is think about how you're using technology as a city with an outward focus to the communities to your citizens, to tourists, to others in the city, but also for your employees with disabilities. Cities are big employers of people, and people with disabilities. For someone with a disability to be successful in a job, and effective in a job with the city, whether it's for the transportation department or the libraries department, the technology that the city is using to get their work done across these teams and different departments, also has to be accessible.

R

Rob Mineault 26:32

Yeah, that was actually that that very question was actually on my list. Because, you know, at first, at first glance, you might think that oh, well, you know, it's really important for whatever technology, whatever front facing technology that that users are going to interact with, it's important for that to be accessible. The community needs to, to be able to, to use that. But, like you said, it's also important for cities out there that that wants to be inclusive, and they want to have inclusive hiring practices, that their systems and their infrastructure is also accessible so that they can do that.

J

James Thurston 27:12

Yep. And we, as part of these assessments, that we do have cities, which we also do have universities and companies and other organizations that are using technology, we absolutely look at what we call the the culture of inclusion, where we look at their systems for hiring and supporting and advancing people with disabilities within the workforce of the city, for sure, and how do they source candidates with with disabilities. How do they support them with accommodations? How do they make sure that their career velocity is the same as other employees without disabilities? In? Are they even thinking about all of that? So we absolutely look at that. It's one of the things that we found early on in our work with cities is that and - this is just anecdotal, not necessarily substantiated with data - but I feel pretty confident about it, that cities in in really any organization that's employing people with disabilities in the IT department and other departments, they're going to have a stronger focus on accessibility,

than cities that aren't necessarily have a diverse workforce, including people with disabilities. And we did an assessment early on at the City of Chicago. And that point came up pretty strongly in the city there had taken some some really good steps to make sure that the IT department had a focus on accessibility, that there were employees with disabilities training on disability, those sorts of things.

R

Rob Mineault 28:39

So I want to I want to step back and talk a little bit about partnerships again. On the show, we, we talked to so many different organizations on so many different levels. And what what occurs to me is that accessibility is not something that's going to be solved by one organization on one level. Obviously, it needs it needs organizations on on a higher level, like, like you guys, right down to, you know, small nonprofits that are working to improve accessibility within their own neighborhoods. Do you feel that all the accessibility work that all these different organizations are working on all over the world is it really fragmented? Like I really think that that strategic partnerships really need to be more of a focus for a lot of organizations. Is that kind of how you are seeing things as well?

J

James Thurston 29:45

Um, let me take a stab at this and then Yulia usually comes at this from a different background than me in a different geography than me, so may have different perspective. As I mentioned, I've been doing work around disability technology and accessibility for 20 years. The landscape has changed enormously in many ways. But to me, frankly, it still feels a bit like a small community of people who are doing work in this space. It's growing, one of the things that our nonprofit does is run the International Association of Accessibility Professionals, IAAP, I would encourage you to check it out. Which is growing chapters in other countries and has 1000s of members, both individual members, and corporate members or organizational members, cities, universities, companies. It focuses on what every professional society does - the training and certification of professionals. So in this case, people who have accessibility as all are part of their job. The fact that that exists and is growing in a robust way, is a real data point about the expansion of real professional credibility and competence are on accessibility. That professional society is both built environment accessibility and digital technology accessibility. So in that sense, I do think, and I see people advertising for jobs every day for accessibility professionals, all of which is great progress. That being said, within the this community of people worldwide who are doing work on accessibility of technology, in particular, in disability, you know, people often talk about the six degrees of separation, I think there's probably one or two degrees of separation between people in the field. I think it's pretty easy to get connected, if you want to be in there are some robust, formal and informal networks that people working in this space worldwide, that that makes it easier to partner with big and small organizations.

Y

Yulia Sarviro 31:48

I would probably add here that in other geographies, there might be differences. And this is related to the role of the government. In many countries without the support from the government without the initiative from the government, the nonprofit organizations and other actors cannot do much on a global level. And for that, we have some statistics, at 3GICT, we

have the DARE index, which stands for Digital Accessibility Rights Evaluation index. We rate more than 130 countries in the world in different aspects of digital accessibility. And one of those aspects is the implementation of digital accessibility rights. We know that they are in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We know that many countries in the world almost all the members of the UN are the members, the signing Parties to the Convention. But do they implement it? This is the big question. And the question of partnerships is very important. But it means the Partnership on all the levels, including the government, and including the local nonprofits.

R

Rob Mineault 33:23

So you guys must have a sort of a unique perspective, because you're you're really you're working on on a global level. So and obviously, you know, different cities in different countries are going to have are going to be farther along the the accessibility process than others. And I don't necessarily want to ask you to throw anybody under the bus or, but do you do you find that quite often? Are you sort of shocked, surprised at, at sort of where certain countries or certain cities are? I mean, there must be like, a real variation in terms of of who's sort of doing it right and who's doing it wrong.

J

James Thurston 34:11

Yeah, yes, I would say I and I'll speak for me I'm, despite having done this for a while, I'm often surprised, both good and bad, frankly, where, you know, cities that I would expect to be a little bit more mature in their approach to accessibility, aren't in cities were pleasantly surprised that oh, well, they're they're doing some really good practices here that support inclusion and accessibility. We often get asked you know, what is the most accessible and inclusive city in the world? And, or who's doing it perfectly? And no one is doing it perfectly. No city is fantastic. Many cities have some good practices. And as I mentioned, we do these assessments of cities across 27 different variables that that look at how accessible and inclusive they are at as they're using technology more and more. But some cities are doing some some really great practices that can we share through these networks that we were just talking about. So, for example, the city of Rio de Janeiro, which is a smart city, and has been investing in smart technology for some time. A couple of things that it does really well, that we often talk about is it trains it's IT professionals on accessibility and disability, that's critically important. So they are at least aware. But one of the other things that they did that I really liked is every city communicates all kinds of information out to the world. They do it on paper, they do it electronically. And typically cities will have for their employees some sort of communications guide that this is how you communicate on behalf of the City of Rio or Washington or whatever it is, you know. It could be their communications guide for employees may include things like the city logo has to go here, the font has to be this, what Rio did was integrate into that communications guide that goes to all employees that are communicating on behalf of the of the city. Accessibility, this is how you make sure that your communications are accessible, so that the city could have the most accessible website in the world. But if they're uploading inaccessible documents as communications, then it doesn't matter. So the fact that that's a great practice that Rio did, I often point to the city of Tel Aviv and Israel as, as a real leader on accessibility as it's becoming smarter. They also train their employees on accessibility, they use these global accessibility standards. They make sure their procurements that they're buying, that they're requiring accessibility in the technology that they buy, and then deploy. New York

also does some really good stuff around procurement as well. They've been piloting in New York transportation stations that integrate technology, but that are also accessible as they integrate technology. I just finished a project with five cities in the Americas so and in Brazil, in Ecuador, and the United States and Chile. This is a project that I really love and a great practice that when I talked to cities around the world about accessibility and inclusion and disability, the number one problem that I hear has nothing to do with technology, it has to do with sidewalks. That sidewalks are inaccessible to people with disabilities. You know, there could be obstacles in the sidewalk, there could be potholes there. There are real challenges to mobility for people with disabilities because of sidewalks. The project that we just did talking about partnerships, we partnered with the University of Washington and with Microsoft, to work with these five cities to address that problem of understanding the accessibility of your 1000s of miles of sidewalks and each and every city by using data, different data streams, and by using AI and more leading edge technologies, so we can use technology to address these long standing, somewhat mundane build environment accessibility challenges. And so in each of these cities, we we get different data streams, we use the University of Washington has a solution to to use those data streams to basically help someone with a disability, different kinds of disabilities to find the most accessible route for them personally, from point A to point B. It may not be the fastest route, but for them, it could be a person with a visual disability or in in a wheelchair, for them it's the most accessible route. And by that it could be you know, there, there's no incline on the sidewalks greater than 7%, whatever is their personal preference. The sidewalk has to be asphalt, though no dirt, sidewalks, there has to be a curb cut, curb and a curb cut. There's all kinds of different variables. But again, because of these leading edge technologies, the cities can actually transform that different data streams into really usable and powerful information that addresses again, the biggest problem that I hear of which is sidewalks.

R

Rob Mineault 39:12

And that's really interesting that you say that, because just recently we were talking with with an orientation and mobility instructor that lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, and one of the the huge things that that city is struggling with is is sidewalks. There's so many cases where sidewalks will just end unexpectedly. And part of the reason behind the problem that the city's had is that their their policy has been the fact that businesses were responsible for the sidewalks in front of their storefront. And so you know, some some businesses would would make a great sidewalk and others didn't and there there didn't really seem to be much of an enforcement mechanism. So you just had this this case where sidewalks, you know, your your mileage will vary depending on on where you are in the city, and what neighborhood you're in. And that seems to be that would be incredibly challenging to try to fix at this point. So I guess my question for you guys is that do you find that, that different cities in globally, are kind of easier to walk through this process depending on where they are in terms of adapting this technology? Because it seems it also seems to me that if it's earlier in that process, and you're able to get to them early and say, here's, here's how you, you, you work in accessibility into all of this technology, it seems to me that that would be a lot easier than to try to go to a city that's already implemented a bunch of things that are that are inaccessible.

J

James Thurston 40:55

Yes, I would probably agree with that. Although I think we, we have found it easy, relatively speaking, to work with cities in all kinds of different geographies, global north and global south, developed and developing economies. I think a couple differentiating factors, in terms of the

complexity of working with the city would be the size, thinking back to some of the smaller and medium sized cities that we worked with it, just because it's easier to have, there's less bureaucracy and there's fewer people to talk to and gaining functions, that sort of thing. It can be easier to sort of work with a group of people in a city that's a bit smaller than a in a very, very large city, although we certainly do work with really large cities, as well. And I think you're right about the whole remediation thing that if and this is why one of the reasons why we focus on procurement, make sure you're buying accessible technology, because if you need to fix it after the fact, then it's going to be expensive and difficult. And the example that I often give on that is one of those kinds of smart solutions that we see all kinds of cities deploying, we have one here in Washington DC is a digital what we call in the US a digital 311 system. A way for citizens or people in the city to report problems, as you mentioned, the streetlight or the pothole it you know, and then get immediate, hopefully immediate action from the relevant department. And then they get back to you and say, you know, we, we dispatch the public works department, they fix the pothole, it should be fine to James squat and check it out. Lots of cities are deploying some version of that lots of companies are developing solutions to do exactly that with with your citizens were fantastic. As a technologist, I love that. We have kind of two examples of that that gets here. The challenge that you mentioned, a large city in Mexico - we will mention city names when we're talking about a good practice. If it's a not such a good practice, we won't. We're not in the business of shaming anybody. But a large city in Mexico had deployed one of these digital 311 systems, it was fantastic. But in a meeting, I asked the CIO, you know, is it accessible? How did you engage people disabilities in the development of IT testing and, and you could literally see the the blood drain from his face, because they hadn't, in knowing that it was a huge investment, it was not necessarily going to be easy to retrofit and make accessible. The opposite of that is the city of Chicago, around the same time actually was creating a digital 311 system, and they did involve people disabilities in the needs analysis, in the development in the testing and every sort of step of the way in developing the digital 311 system, which is, which is a award winning and highly accessible.

Y

Yulia Sarviro 44:03

Regarding this, smaller cities who are early building in the days of getting towards accessibility. Yes, I would also agree that it is the best time when they can start thinking about it and deploy into their procurement policy. But the major challenge that they all have is the budget. And they usually need to decide what is their priority with the budget that they have. What are the focus areas for them that they need to focus first. So it is of course it would be good if the disability community organizations like G3ICT can show the importance of accessibility. That accessibility is as important as privacy and security and open data and everything else that pops up when you are starting the digital transformation journey. But that would be good to have a platform or a forum where we all can get up to them and deliver this message to them.

R

Rob Mineault 45:21

I always feel like what I have to sort of constantly remind myself of is, you know, as advocates, and as people who have have sort of talked to so many different organizations, it's really easy to get impatient and want things to move forward at a much faster pace than they seem to be able. And I think, I guess what I always have to remind myself is, it is a process. There's a lot of moving parts to all of this in terms of embracing accessibility, and really making some some forward strides. And that's everything from it could be something that's it's cultural, or the

country or it could be right down to sort of local government. I think that attitudes around accessibility and even disability can trickle down so far right down to like the local, you know, city council level, and everywhere in between. And that's, that's a lot of moving parts. And that's a lot of hearts and minds, to sort of sink into. So I guess my question is, from your perspective, on global level, are people beginning to embrace this a lot more? And is this sort of trickling down to everybody?

J

James Thurston 46:40

I'll jump in first. I'm sort of a glass half full kind of person optimistic. And, yeah, I do think that we are seeing a extensive focus around the world in different geographies, in different size organizations, different sized cities, on accessibility inclusion. As I mentioned, I never have this, the conversations where I'm begging someone to just to engage on the topic of accessibility and inclusion. Those for me anyways, for my expense, those days are gone, it's much more about what do we actually do, which, again, is a really good place to be. There's an openness to that. Still a lot of need, both in cities in this case, but also in the companies that are developing solutions. One of the things that that we did a few years ago, as part of a global study on, on innovation in cities and smart solutions is actually did a survey of companies and innovators that are in incubators and accelerators around the world. These are people creating new technology solutions, and very few of them had any idea if they're new solutions, which could be the next great thing, were accessible. In that sense, we are probably still falling behind if all of these new solutions that are coming out every day are, are not accessible. The ones that are being developed by new companies or existing companies and new products and services. So there's a lot of work to be done there, for sure. But I think through activities, like the professional society and other professional societies we've done some partnering with. For example, the professional Society for Human Resources, professionals, they are part of the solution, they also need to understand accessibility and inclusion. So through these networks, and through these organizations, like the big banks and, and companies, I absolutely do feel like we are covering more ground and getting more people engaged. But you are right, we need to continue sort of not just pushing it down to the sort of line managers and people on the front lines of, of technology, purchasing and deployment, but also to the senior executives. A lot of the work we do is with the C suite of companies subsidies, they need to buy into this. We did an assessment of the University of Massachusetts a couple of years ago, we're looking at how well they were using technology. It's a huge organization, lots of students, lots of staff, and the CIO at the university was fantastic and was really driving change at that university to be more accessible. He talked about pockets of heroic effort that there were people in departments, kind of alone, really slogging away wanting to to improve accessibility. But there were these pockets of heroic effort that just by themselves, were going to make some progress, but they're not going to transform the university or a city. And to do that, you really need to change the culture, which I think you guys are, were asking about before and to do that you need the senior executives involved. So you need to be pushing up, focus on it up, including to the boards and there's organizations like valuable 500 that are doing that in companies but also push it down to the the people who are working on technology deployments every day.

R

Rob Mineault 50:07

Well, great, good. I'm glad that that was your answer. Because I was like, I hope to end on a high note. So that's good. It was perfect. I kind of I kind of set that up on purpose, I was hoping that that would be your answer.

Y Yulia Sarviro 50:20

So in October, we are going to have our annual conference, which is one of the biggest conference on accessibility in the world. M-Enabling will be happening in Washington, DC, October 24-26. And it gathers representatives of the industry of the CTs of the national governments of disability community, nonprofit organizations, academia. So the audience is huge. The lineup of speakers and panelists in different sessions is huge and very diverse. And I would say, these are the leading experts in their fields. And of course, were looking forward to to see as many people as possible there to make these discussions more lively and more useful and helpful to the year industry. Or I can even say to all the industries because accessibility applies to any industry, not only to smart cities, or to governments, not only to technology industry, but also to retail, to justice system, to museums, and tourism. So there are so many aspects of accessibility that are covered at these biggest event.

R Ryan Fleury 51:57

And so if people want more information on M-Enabling or Smart Cities or G3ICT, where can people go?

J James Thurston 52:05

Sure, so for G3ICT, which is the overall nonprofit organization that we work for, in that professional societies there, and the M-Enabling summit is there, that's G3ICT.org. For our smart cities work, it's smartcitiesforall.org. The professional society is accessibilityassociation.org.

R Rob Mineault 52:34

Excellent. Awesome. Well, once again, we want to thank you so much for taking the time out to talk to us about this. And, and honestly, like, thank you so much for the work that you guys are doing, because it's incredibly important, both on a on a global level, but also, you know, all of the work that you're doing is trickling down to, you know, to even to me and Ryan's neighborhoods. So we certainly appreciate that.

J James Thurston 53:12

You bet. Thanks for bringing us on and for helping to get the word out. We appreciate your work as well.

R Rob Mineault 53:16

Absolutely. We're happy to have you guys on anytime. You know, and we will be keeping a close eye on the M-Enabling events in October.

J James Thurston 53:27
Well, if you end up going, let us know. We'd love to see you there.

R Rob Mineault 53:30
That's a great idea. I'd love to see Washington. Pitch that to Steve. All right, guys. Well, again, thank you so much.

J James Thurston 53:43
Fantastic. Thank you.

R Ryan Fleury 53:44
Thanks, James. Have a great day.

R Rob Mineault 53:50
Whew, man, I tell you I love talking to these organizations that are working on a global level, although it's a little intimidating because it's just like, wow, these guys are doing like such important work and are so high level that it and they're talking to like to schmoes like us.

R Ryan Fleury 54:07
I'm glad there are people that are built for duties, jobs, careers like that, because I know myself, and how frustrated I get at the pace of progress or lack thereof when it comes to assistive technology accessibility inclusion, that I would just be, I would be fired in day one. There's just no way that I could day after day after day, be reaching out to people in organizations and not seeing faster progress. Like you said, it's a process. It's not just a matter of flipping a switch and boom, we're accessible. You know, like you one of the examples I was thinking of is that we talked about the lack of awareness of assistive assistive technology or accessibility. We have post secondaries that aren't even teaching web design, accessible web design still, right? So just imagine how daunting it is to talk to a city or a government about becoming accessible. I just yeah, I'm glad there's people doing it that are more qualified than I.

R Rob Mineault 55:13
Well, you know, and I think that the thing to take away from from today's show is that things are getting better. It does sound like that's being the idea of accessibility is being well, more are far more well received these days, than even 10 years ago. So that is progress right there. I think that I think that what faces a lot of people is not the, they want to make things more

accessible. They just don't know how, and that's where organizations like G3ICT are doing amazing work, because they're able to sort of come in and say, Okay, here's how you do it. And that's, and that's really what's needed.

R

Ryan Fleury 55:57

But do you think, do you think, though, and I'm just playing devil's advocate, do you think that's a cop out? You know, we can we have Google, if you type in how to make an app accessible, you're gonna get guidelines on guidelines. So in some regards, I think that may be used as a cop out. But yeah, there's definitely some high tech stuff that I understand an engineer may not understand accessibility,

R

Rob Mineault 56:30

You have to remember, like, cities don't operate like that. It's not like the city's making, say an app. They're buying that from a vendor, a vendor makes it. And so if the vendor isn't making that app accessible, and they sell it to the city and the city purchases it, then the city stuck. I'm saying the city doesn't necessarily know how to make that app accessible, right. So that's, that's part of the problem. But, you know, in any case, I mean, the fact that that G3ICT is around and you're able to step cities through that process, and then be able to point to things that aren't accessible - because the other thing that I think that you have to remember is that if the city releases an app, or a system that's not necessarily accessible, they don't necessarily always hear about that. Like, again, it's, if the community doesn't push back on something and complain or make noise that hey, this part isn't accessible, the city's never even going to know. And that's why, you know, G3ICT, they go in and they do these audits, right? And they go, Okay, well, this system isn't accessible. This I mean, cities not even even know the fact that that certain aspects of their infrastructure are inaccessible.

R

Ryan Fleury 57:44

But let's flip that around to the community as a whole. You know, James mentioned the 311 service and how people can leave comments. I know there's a pothole on such and such a street, or there's a laid out or whatever, you know, here in the Lower Mainland in British Columbia, do we as members of the community, do we have a mechanism, a website and app a phone number that we can call to let let the city's know of issues like that? I don't know. Maybe there is regression here. But like, let's flip that around. I know that the city may not know about accessibility, but do we, as members of the disability community have a mechanism to report back to the city? Yeah, who knows? Right? If we do, is it accessible?

R

Rob Mineault 58:32

I mean, there's a lot of moving parts, really thinking about it? I think that embracing accessibility on so many different levels, when you're passing through so many different levels of government, and people, because at the end of the day, government just made up with people, you know, it's gonna vary widely depending on the city. And because it right down to like, I don't know, maybe somebody on city council has an uncle that's in a chair, and they're

way more in tune with accessibility needs than then everybody else, that particular district of that particular city, maybe that's a little bit more accessible than others because of that. You're I mean, so there's all these different variables, what federal government is in power at any given time can sort of influence how seriously they're taking accessibility. And, you know, you stretch that out to a global level. I mean, that was just it must be just so challenging to interact with all those variables. So Well, I mean, those guys are doing incredible work.

R

Ryan Fleury 59:37

They are. Absolutely. And I think, you know, one of the one of the comments I had passed along to you before the conversation today was, you know, there is some chatter in the disability community about the word accessible or accessibility. And does that word actually mean or define anything? It doesn't. It's such a generic term. We hear it used in mainstream conversation all the time. Not related to the ability for someone blind to read an elevator button, it may be used as you know, I found that accessible or easy to access, you know, there's usable, there's accessible, there's inclusive.

R

Rob Mineault 1:00:17

I don't know, I'm starting to change my mind about the word accessible or accessibility, because it's so generic. And when the mainstream uses it, it sometimes means something totally different than what we think it should mean. All this going to do goes goes back to your question about standards. And that's why that's why standards are important. When you say something is accessible, that's because it has checked every standard checkbox in the list. At the end of the day, accessibility just means exactly what you said, like, can I access this thing? Whether that's a store, because that store has a ramp that somebody in a chair can use to get into or if it's a, you know, if it's a website, or if it's an app. I mean, I agree, I think that the term itself can be challenging. And I think that for for a business, a local government, a federal government to just make something accessible, that can be a challenge, because what does that mean?

R

Ryan Fleury 1:01:32

Even just talking about a single storefront, a single storefront? Do they have a sidewalk? Do they have a ramp? Do they have an accessible bathroom? Is their ATM machine accessible? You know, like, there's just one business? That's, that's daunting for a business owner to even contemplate because they don't know. Are the price tags on the clothing racks accessible or do I have to ask for assistance? You know, like, it's so daunting and complex. And that's just one one business. We're talking about his city and the infrastructure? Oh, my God.

R

Rob Mineault 1:02:08

Yeah, it's a challenge. Right. I mean, this is, this is why they're doing such important work. You know, I think at the end of the day, the important thing is, is that the conversations are happening. People are taking it seriously. And they're trying their best and yes, sometimes they fail. Hopefully, they learn from the mistake and they're able to address it in future builds.

R Ryan Fleury 1:02:35
So but yeah, we need to learn patience.

R Rob Mineault 1:02:40
I think that's I think that's your lesson of the day, my friend. I think you just need to be patient, but things move slowly, especially when governments are involved and bureaucracies involved. But the sounds like the conversations happening and I'm coming away from this episode, feeling optimistic. Surprise, right? Yeah, absolutely. All right . Let's get out of here, sir. Hey, Ryan? Rob. Hey, where can people find us?

R Ryan Fleury 1:03:11
They can find us online. at atbanter.com.

R Rob Mineault 1:03:14
They can drop us an email if they so desire at cowbell@atbanter.com

R Ryan Fleury 1:03:22
And they can find us online on Facebook, Twitter, wherever you listen to your podcasts.

R Rob Mineault 1:03:28
It's right. We're right. All right. Wow, man. See, we are a lean mean, Podcast machine. When Lis and Steve are gone. We've just got this down to a science.

R Ryan Fleury 1:03:42
Yeah, no wasting time. No frivolous banter. Right to the point

R Rob Mineault 1:03:48
Everybody's focused. Although I do miss them.

R Ryan Fleury 1:03:52
Really?



Rob Mineault 1:03:53

A little bit. It's fun. Giving Lis a hard time.



Ryan Fleury 1:03:58

Yes. Well, don't give her too hard of a time. She may never come back.



Rob Mineault 1:04:01

Oh, she will. She loves it. She loves it. And she's listening to this right now. So hi, Lis. We know you love it. All right. That is about do it for us this week. Big thanks, of course to James and Yulia, for joining us. And we will see everybody next week.