

AT Banter Podcast Episode 321 - Accessibility Business Guide...

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SPEAKERS

Rob Mineault, Steve Barclay, Megan Heximer, Ryan Fleury

R Rob Mineault 00:17
Hey and welcome to another episode of AT Banter.

S Steve Barclay 00:24
Banter banter.

R Rob Mineault 00:27
Nice, nice. I you know, since that week that we had some issues with a cowbell, I'm just on like on the edge of my seat every at the beginning of every episode. I'm like, please work please work please. It really threw us off when we didn't have the cowbell. I know I might have to get back to the other audio interface just to test it again and see what the issue was. But clearly you need to return it. It has a problem with cowbells. That's right. That's why I have alternatives. That's right. Hey, oh, you know what? 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. Yay, I'm first again. I'm gonna have to start changing that up. It's going to your head. I really just look at the Zoom windows, and you're actually just first. Hey, who else is here? It's Mr. Steve Barclay.

S Steve Barclay 01:41
Hey, I'm last again.

R Rob Mineault 01:46

R Rob Mineault 01:49

And we've got no Lis Malone because, I don't know, reasons. Yeah, sometimes she just shows up. She's, you know, the Axl Rose of this podcast. She just shows up when she feels like it.

S Steve Barclay 02:05

I thought that was my job.

R Rob Mineault 02:07

You're Slash. Because it's the hair. Hey, how are you fellas?

S Steve Barclay 02:18

Well, just outstanding. Thank you.

R Rob Mineault 02:21

Well, that's excellent. Yeah. Middle of the week. Yeah. Working for the weekend. Yeah. Tell me about it. Anything new and exciting in your worlds? No? Really? Six years I've been doing this, I don't know why I keep asking that. One day, there'll be something like yeah, no, actually parachuting into Prague. So is anybody going on a trip anytime soon? Steve, you must be going somewhere? Vacation, not for like work.

S Steve Barclay 03:07

I was gonna say, I'm going to Victoria for work. But that's not that exciting. Jackie, and I keep talking about going someplace, you know, warm and someplace where you know, the waves are lapping at the shore. And there's palm trees swaying in the breeze, but we can't decide where.

R Rob Mineault 03:24

I hear trips to Brazil right now are cheap.

S Steve Barclay 03:28

Yeah, I imagine I imagine. Yeah.

R Rob Mineault 03:31

You just got to just got to bide your time and wait for the right deal.

S

Steve Barclay 03:36

Yeah, yeah, for sure. We're thinking about places like Cuba, or, you know, Mexico is out for right now because apparently everybody's shooting each other down there. And we talked about to possibly Thailand or Bali or something like that. But yeah, we haven't we haven't nailed anything down.

R

Rob Mineault 03:56

I need a raise.

S

Steve Barclay 03:59

You need a wife who's not retired. Tell her to get back out there and earn more income.

R

Rob Mineault 04:12

Hey, Ryan. Yeah, Rob? What are we doing today?

R

Ryan Fleury 04:19

Today we are speaking with Megan Heximer, who has developed an app called the Accessibility Business Guide. So she's here to tell us all about this. Welcome, Megan.

M

Megan Heximer 04:31

Thank you so much. I'm happy to be here.

R

Rob Mineault 04:34

Yeah, thanks. Thanks for joining us. We took a look at the app and I got to say like this is it's a great idea. And actually, well, I'll get into it later on. But why don't we just start out with just telling us sort of how the whole thing came about and how you got involved in making this?

M

Megan Heximer 04:56

Yeah, for sure. I'm just going to start out by I'm just saying I use she her pronouns. And I'm an able bodied for now individual. And also just acknowledge that I'm joining from Edmonton and Alberta, which is unceded traditional lands of many indigenous peoples from across time. So with that, I've been working in the disability field for about five or six years now, mostly doing

frontline work with youth with disabilities. And we were just tired of going out to places. And once we got there finding out that they were not accessible, or you get in the door, and that was about it. And I couldn't find anything out there like this. So I just decided, if it's not there, we might as well make it. And with the help from them, we kind of came up with this.

R

Rob Mineault 05:53

Great, so can you kind of maybe just walk us through a little bit of the use case scenario and how it kind of works and what it does?

M

Megan Heximer 06:01

Absolutely, yeah. So what when you log on to the app after you've downloaded it, you can if you share your location services, you'll find like a little icon showing where you are, and then it'll show you any businesses that are already pre loaded onto the map will pop up with little symbols. And you can click on any of those symbols. Or you can also go through the list, or you can search by individual cities. So it's currently only available across Canada, but we are hoping to expand soon. And then if you want to, for example, leave a review for business, you can click on that, and then you will be prompted to leave a review. And you can choose what you want to review based on your accessibility needs. So for example, if things like guide dog accessible, or picture signage aren't pertaining to you, then you can leave them blank, and they won't be included in the overall rating. But anything that you do you want to review that is applicable to your situation, you can rate it out of five stars, you can leave a little note at the top kind of saying why you gave that review what they could be doing better. And there's also options to leave a photo. And then the kind of idea is that it's gonna give people with disabilities the like opportunity to navigate businesses that are accessible for their needs, based on real people with lived experiences, reviews and evaluations of the business, and then also, it's going to hopefully raise more awareness in the community and have businesses looking at ways that they can improve their accessibility overall.

R

Rob Mineault 07:53

I think that, you know, it's really interesting, because I think that there's a real business case for this too, because, you know, for businesses that, say do get featured on the app, and they are getting good reviews, well, of course, they're gonna get more customers as a result of that, just naturally. So what kind of response have you gotten from businesses? And have you kind of been engaging with businesses as you've been developing the app?

M

Megan Heximer 08:20

Yeah, so we just came out in November. So we're still getting out there and trying to get the word out to businesses. For the most part, businesses that I have reached out to, I would say they're interested, but the actual step forward of creating the account on that app so that they can see and respond to feedback. They're hesitant to, it's free for everybody to use. So both businesses and users, so there's no cost to businesses to use it. I think more just more awareness, and to be out there about how important it actually is and how many people there

are with disabilities in the community that aren't maybe being able to access their business because it's not accessible. And if they had this app, then they could see where they can make improvements.

R

Rob Mineault 09:06

Yeah, I mean, I guess on the one hand, if I if I put on my business hat for a moment, I mean, I guess some businesses might be hesitant, because they're almost afraid of their it's, it's almost easier being in that space of oh, well, we didn't know, then to actually, you know, because once once some sort of accessibility problem has been addressed at their location, that might be you know, something that they're gonna actually have to address. Is that kind of the sense that you get when you sense their hesitancy, or is it something else you think?

M

Megan Heximer 09:44

I think a lot of it is businesses will be like, Oh, well, we have a step up. So we're not accessible. We can't be on the map. When in reality, of course, we know that that's not the only accessibility barrier They're out there, there's definitely other ways that they can be accessible for people with other disabilities. And also, the point of the app isn't that they have to be a fully accessible business to be on there. It's raising awareness about maybe certain areas where there's improvement, what's working well, and how in the future, they can make adjustments to that. So I think a lot of it comes down to businesses, or I guess, yeah, I worry that they aren't currently accessible. So they shouldn't be on there.

R

Ryan Fleury 10:34

So I just want to clarify if I could, so I'm totally blind, I installed the app this afternoon. And so when it brought up a list of the businesses, were those businesses, companies or organizations that have already opted into the app? Or is it just finding those businesses based on my location and suggesting them?

M

Megan Heximer 10:58

Yeah, so those ones are just based on your location. So we've just pre populated the app with businesses across Canada for now, mostly in the major cities. So and then we can always add more businesses, there's a option to request a business that's on on there if you'd like to review it. So yeah, so far, that's just ones that are on the map, to see which ones have been reviewed, you do have to click on the business, and then it'll show you if there's a review.

R

Rob Mineault 11:32

Now, how about the community? How, how has the response been from from them?

M

Megan Heximer 11:37

Megan Heximer 11:57

So far? It's been really great. Yeah. I think a lot of people saw the need for it. So they've been really excited to hear that it's coming out, I definitely would have hoped to have more reviews out there already. Because that's kind of, that's why we created it was so that people could see other people's reviews and learn where places maybe more accessible or less accessible to go to before they actually arrive. I've been reaching out with some different organizations, mostly in Edmonton at the moment. And the response has been really good. And people have been really excited about something like this coming out.

R Rob Mineault 12:21

Well, yeah, for sure. I mean, what I mean, what people don't, I think realize is that just how big of a pain, it can be like say if you're in a chair, and you want to go to the pub with with friends, finding a pub, that you know, that is going to be completely accessible for you can be a real challenge, and have experience with it. You know, nine times out of 10, you don't even really know until you show up.

M Megan Heximer 12:48

Absolutely, yeah. People don't realize like how it takes like a whole more degree of planning to even think about where you want to go, if once you get there, you're going to be able to go to the bathroom, are there going to be seats for you is it going to be like accessible in other ways, it's going to be to sensory overload, all that kind of stuff. So it just requires a whole more degree of energy to do those plans. I know when I've been places with the youth I work with we've driven like half an hour to get to a place and we find out that it's 10 steps down and just out of spite, we're like, Well, I'm gonna pick you up out of your chair and carry you down that way just to go because we make the trip.

R Rob Mineault 13:35

Well, what I find interesting, too, is that now that you've kind of done this and built this out, now I'm going, there's no reason why there isn't like sort of an accessibility aspect to something like Google Maps. I mean, if you think about some, you know, Google Maps, I mean, you can you can have a satellite view, you can look at people's front lawns, you know, you can a lot of restaurants, you can look up their menu right there on on Google maps, photos of the interior and stuff. But they they've done nothing in terms of doing something like this.

M Megan Heximer 14:15

The technology is out there. But, yeah, the priority just isn't there.

R Rob Mineault 14:20

100%. So even the fact that you know, and, you know, I it's one of these things where it's just like, it's, it's incredibly it's incredible that you've built this, but it is sort of maddening that you've had to build this because you're absolutely right. The technology is there. And Google

you've had to build this because you're absolutely right. The technology is there. And Google certainly has the resources to make something like this really ubiquitous, but they just haven't even after, you know, whatever. 10 or 12 years of Google Maps being around.

M Megan Heximer 14:51

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It's sad that you know, people have to live through the struggle. We just have to come up with stuff like this on their own because big corporations aren't prioritizing it.

R Rob Mineault 15:08

Yeah. You know, hopefully what happens is apps like yours, gain some ground and begin to get used. And then that catches the attention of something like Google Maps. And, you know, they they start to implement some of this stuff. Or who knows, you know, what if we're building a fence, a fairy tale fantasy scenario, maybe you know what they, they, they buy your app for, like \$10 million, and you retire.

S Steve Barclay 15:39

What, what are your plans for getting more people engaged with the app to get more data into it?

M Megan Heximer 15:47

Yeah, so right now, I work full time. And I'm also a student full time. So there's not as much time as I would like to be able to get this into it. But just pretty much I just go to businesses, tell them about it. Give them my business card, say, you should join him, basically, tell them why and how important it is. And then also just getting the word out with more organizations that work within the disability community so they can spread the word and then kind of just that networking, like the youth that I currently work with, they've been sharing it with other people that they know and just trying to get it out that way, and hope that hope that it takes off and that we can make a difference.

R Rob Mineault 16:36

So tell me how it happens that you sit down one day and just decide, You know what, I'm going to make an app. Like, just from a technical standpoint, did you know anything about about building an app when you first started this? Did you did like, Do you have a team of people that sort of take care of the technical aspects of it? How did that all work?

M Megan Heximer 17:00

Yeah, so I knew nothing. The very basics of technology. And that's it. So I hired a small app development business based out of Kelowna, and one of the developers actually also has an vision impairment himself. So I thought it was a really good fit. They were quite passionate

about the project. So I hired them to do all of the techie kind of stuff. And then we just work together to do the like, design part of it. And then I worked with the youth that I work with, and their families and friends with disabilities to just get their input because I wanted it to, of course be centered around people disabilities, I'm not the one with lived experience. So I want the people with lived experience to be the ones kind of putting forth how it came about. So they were kind of the ones who came up with stuff we all came up together about like what the different options for reviewing would be like so can go through it if you want to. We have like signage and media you can review so closed captioning options described video options, picture signage, large print signage, or Braille signage and prints. For bathrooms. They have a universal size change tables, if they have handrails. If it's accessible for a full size wheelchair and a caregiver, if it's accessible for a full size wheelchair without a caregiver, there's wheelchair height, seeing if the aisles are wide enough. If there's an elevator or lift ramps, ceiling or floor lifts, accessible parking stalls, automatic doors, wheelchair height, tilt or checkouts adequate lighting, if it's sensory accommodating guide dog accessible, if there was helpful staff if their website is accessible, and then induction and hearing loops. And then of course, there's always things that keep coming up that I'm like, oh, we should have added this in. And so I definitely want anybody to be able to provide feedback. And we want to include everybody's options.

R

Rob Mineault 19:12

So how long did the development process take?

M

Megan Heximer 19:15

A little bit longer than I was expecting. It was supposed to be about six weeks, which turned into about six months. But I guess good things take time.

R

Rob Mineault 19:26

That's right.

M

Megan Heximer 19:32

So yeah, so I started kind of the whole process in April of 2022. And then the app officially came out on both the iOS and Android app stores in early November.

R

Rob Mineault 19:48

Well, and are you still actively developing it or is it in a place now where you're like, okay, well, we can kind of ease up on the on the development and sort of lean into marketing?

M

Megan Heximer 19:59

Yeah. So the development besides like little tweaks here and there that pop up, for the most part, the its will say stable for now. Right? Of course, I keep coming up with new things. I'm like, oh, we should do this. But for now we're keeping it as is. And then we'll always add on, when that comes to it. But yeah, so it's more in the stages of getting the word out there and getting businesses and reviews onto the app now.

R

Rob Mineault 20:27

I mean, I have to say that, you know, I think one of the really great things about the app, that's sort of something that's probably not necessarily intended, but is incredibly valuable. It's just the education factor. Like even when you were going down that list of things that would would make a venue accessible there, there were like three or four things that I had never thought of. And, you know, we've been doing this podcast for six years, and I've been I've worked in the assistive technology field for for many more than that. And, you know, even I was like, oh, yeah, geez, I hadn't thought of that. So I'm sure for businesses, a big majority of businesses, I mean, they look at accessibility, and they go, okay, well, we've got to ramp. And, you know, we've got, we've got large doors on the bathroom, we're compliant. With that, you know, you know, and they have no idea of all the other things that that would, would make their venue more accessible. So, you know, it's really a win win for everybody. I think that it's just, you know, the tricky part is just to get the businesses to sort of onboard and get them to really kind of embrace some of this stuff.

M

Megan Heximer 21:39

Yeah, for sure, for sure. And it's definitely not an exhaustive list either of ways to make a business accessible, but it's ever growing. But um, yeah, I think once a few businesses are on there, it'll kind of they'll maybe share the word and let other people know about how effective it is. And hopefully, it just spreads.

R

Rob Mineault 22:12

It's actually incredibly valuable data for a business, because of, you know, if they're seeing reviews coming in being like, you know, like, yeah, look, I was, you know, I'm blind. And I really wanted to come to the restaurant, but you had no Braille signage, there was no Braille menu. And they see that, you know, that's not necessarily a high cost fix for them to do to address and then to solve the problem and maybe get more business. I mean, at the end of the day, they're going to benefit from the data that's going to come in, I think that just the word accessibility just kind of scares them sometimes.

M

Megan Heximer 22:50

Yeah, I think definitely. I mean, that's fair. Before I got into the field, I would have been scared by it too probably. So that's just a big part of having to get the education out there. And hopefully, not scare people away.

R

Rob Mineault 23:10

Yeah.

R

Ryan Fleury 23:11

Well, how many conversations have we had where, you know, a business will say, Well, I don't have people with disabilities come to my, my building? I don't have people in the wheelchair come in? Well, it's because you've got stairs leading up to your door, so they're not going to come in? So this would be like Yelp for the disability community?

R

Rob Mineault 23:30

Yeah. Kind of, I mean, but it's also like, you know, but on the other side of it, it's an incredibly valuable resource for you know, if somebody does want to go to the, to a pub, and they, that way, they know what they're getting into before they spend the time and the effort getting to that venue and realizing, you know, just what they're in store for. Because, and really, like, shame on shame on Google. Like, honestly, this is something that they - Apple has a Maps program too, don't just dump on Google. Okay, that's right. Well, listen, I have a Google phone. So I trust me, I love Google. But, you know, yeah, you're right. I mean, Apple Maps, same thing. All of these maps are, you're so right, Megan, that, you know, the technology is there. That's the frustrating part about this, because it's just fields and forms. And it's just more data to collect, and they can easily implement a lot of this stuff into it. There's just there's no reason that, you know, you had to go out and create this from the ground up. I mean, I think it's again, it's great that you did, but it's yeah, it's it's frustrating to think that they certainly have the resources and the money to throw at this to really, to really build this out.

M

Megan Heximer 24:47

It's sad. It's 2023 and still not on the forefront of many people's minds. But, but as you were saying, Ryan how many times like, have we called businesses with the youth I work with and check if it's accessible.

R

Rob Mineault 25:16

Bathroom may be wide enough, but the doors do have to push open, you know?

M

Megan Heximer 25:20

Yeah. Or so many times, we've gone in the bathrooms big enough for a chair. But if you need, if you need the support staff, you have to go with the bathroom door open, because you can't fit the chair and people in. So it's just yeah.

R

Ryan Fleury 25:36

So other than adding more businesses and educating businesses and the public about the app, and its potential, what, where would you like to see the app go? Because I can already think of, you know, there's an app out there, I believe it's called menus for all there's access now there's, you know, all these multitude of apps that, you know, at some point may be able to link together and share data. Is that, are those part of your plans going forward?

M

Megan Heximer 26:04

Yeah, that will be like that would be ideal, for sure. So when I kind of started this all, I couldn't find any apps out there like that. Now, of course, after all this time, I'm like, oh, I hear about this one and this one. And so to me, I would 100% be open to collaborating and sharing data and all that because my goal here is just to well, to make communities more accessible. So whatever way we can do that, that's amazing. Also, expanding outside of Canada, for sure, I would love to see us do there's just different rules for like app on App Stores, and the privacy policies and everything. So gotta do like the technical stuff with the lawyer with all that but that way? Yeah, that's kind of short to medium term.

R

Rob Mineault 27:03

Yeah, right.

M

Megan Heximer 27:06

And then we're also hoping to start up like a little bit of a blog on the website, that we just just got finalized website. So yeah, have a little blog like about to be able to hire people with lived experience to share. Whatever they want to share about and have other people be able to read it. And then yeah, that's kind of another thing we have in the works for now.

R

Rob Mineault 27:37

So you're looking for people to contribute to the blog, do you have a pool of beta testers or community working on the app or testing the app?

M

Megan Heximer 27:47

Just kind of like, my friends. And the people I work with, are trying to just like, they're kind of the ones that have, like, gone through and check the app, I have a friend who's blind, and she went through and kind of did a little test for me to see if it met her standards of using her accessibility features on her phone. But of course, what works for her might not work for everyone else. So I'm always open to feedback. But yeah, in terms of the blog, and stuff, really, anybody who's interested in contributing for us is just important to definitely make sure that anybody that is contributing is getting like compensated, they don't want people to feel like they're having to put their valuable information out there and not be fairly compensated as they should be. Because I know that a lot of people in the disability community and other

minority groups definitely get asked to share their insight and not always be fairly compensated for it. So that's just one thing that it's just important to us to make sure everybody's compensated for their knowledge.

R

Rob Mineault 29:03

Well, so speaking of that, if people are interested in both the app in terms of helping you test it, spread the word, contribute to the blog, what's the best way that they can sort of get in touch with you?

M

Megan Heximer 29:18

Yeah, so they can either reach out, we have our Instagram page, which is @accessibilityBG and then our website that is up and running now and hopefully has no little bugs or anything. It also has a little box where you can hop on and put your information if you want to be either collaborate in any kind of way or be contributed to the blog. So there's, and that'll just come directly through to our email and then we can have a conversation further about that.

R

Rob Mineault 29:58

Awesome. And so if they're searching on the inside, this is for iOS and Android, correct?

M

Megan Heximer 30:06

Yes.

R

Rob Mineault 30:07

Perfect. So if they're on if they're given stores, what can they search for to find the app?

M

Megan Heximer 30:12

Yeah, so it's Accessibility Business Guide both on the Apple and Android, Samsung stores there.

R

Rob Mineault 30:30

Well, listen, thank you so much for coming on and talking about the app. Best of luck with it.

M

Megan Heximer 30:37

Awesome. Thank you so much for having me.

R Rob Mineault 30:38
Awesome. Megan. Well have a good night.

M Megan Heximer 30:40
Yeah, you guys as well.

R Rob Mineault 30:43
Take care. Do you guys remember we talked to somebody, there was a I think there were a brother and sister and they were in the UK. And they were doing something similar to this. This would have been like maybe in the first year of the podcast.

S Steve Barclay 31:00
Yeah, I remember something along these lines, too.

R Rob Mineault 31:03
Yeah, they were they were doing something that was similar. I don't know if they were they were just kind of doing pubs or something. Or, or maybe it was the same, same kind of idea where it was, it was all businesses.

S Steve Barclay 31:21
See, here's the problem. We're getting old and crotchety and we can't remember

R Rob Mineault 31:26
Good thing our website has a search engine built in. Yeah, that that way it was I remember, it was really early on. I remember thinking, Yeah, this is a really great idea. And so I'm just thinking like, that was six years ago, like, God, why, doesn't Google have something like this like this? It seems ridiculous that, you know, you can you can zoom in with satellite view and check out you know, the garden gnomes on somebody's front lawn. But there's there's no field where, you know, you can tell whether or not a pub as an accessible bathroom. Yeah. It's a real oversight. And again, and you know, I think it's, it's probably is one of these things are just, they didn't, they haven't thought of it. Like accessibility just isn't at the top of mind.

R Ryan Fleury 32:11

They didn't have to think about it. There was no Accessible Canada Act, there was no Accessible BC Act. Alberta is coming on board, Saskatchewan is coming on board. Accessibility is at the forefront of people's minds now. And businesses are going to have to start taking notice.

R Rob Mineault 32:25

Yeah, but what worries me is that we, you know, compliance, you know, the list of things that would make a venue really super accessible is very different than compliance. Oh, for sure. Yes. That is a pretty low bar, to be honest. It's broad strokes is what compliance is. Right. Whereas what we're talking about with with Megan's app is, you know, venues that actually have, not only you know, you can not only get into the venue, but it's also a pleasant, accessible experience from start to front. Anything else to say about any of that before we get the hell out of here?

R Ryan Fleury 33:10

Nope. Everybody go download the app.

R Rob Mineault 33:13

Yeah, that's right. And leave your reviews. The other great thing about the app is that it's community driven. So it's, it's going to be as good as the data that the community puts into it. So yeah, get going on the app. start plugging stuff in. Hey Ryan? Yeah. Rob? I had to think about that for a second. Wait, did I go to the right person? Oh, but she's not here. Where can people find us?

R Ryan Fleury 33:49

They can find us www.atbanter.com Hey, they can also drop us an email if they so desire at cowbell@atbanter.com.

S Steve Barclay 34:03

And if you're one of those internet addicted people, you can find us on Facebook and Instagram. Twitter, no, not Twitter.

R Ryan Fleury 34:15

Not on Instagram. We haven't posted there in six years.

S Steve Barclay 34:21

I didn't say we're good at social media. There's a difference.

R

Rob Mineault 34:27

There's a lovely picture on our Instagram feed of us having breakfast at that ABC restaurant.

R

Ryan Fleury 34:34

That's like six years ago.

R

Rob Mineault 34:36

Yeah. Wow, lovely. We all had more hair. That's right. Can see Ryan stuffing his face with pancakes.

R

Ryan Fleury 34:47

Yum.

R

Rob Mineault 34:51

That's it. That is it. All right. That is going to about do it for us this week, big thanks to Megan for joining us and we will see everybody next week.