PUBLIC SECTOR FUTURE podcast – Episode 7 – Accessibility in the public sector

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Talent:
1.   **Olivia Neal [host]**
2.   **Yazmine Laroche [guest]**

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OLIVIA NEAL: Hello, and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes. We explore stories from around the world where public servants have been successful at driving change, and we meet the people behind the stories, hear their firsthand experiences and their lessons learned. Throughout the series, we discuss technology and trends, as well as the cultural aspects of making change happen.

I'm delighted to be joined today by Yazmine Laroche, Deputy Minister for Public Service accessibility in the federal government of Canada. Yazmine has over 25 years of experience in the public sector, across a variety of federal government departments. In 2019, she received an honorary doctorate from Carleton University, recognizing her significant contribution to greatly improving accessibility for all Canadians. And she's the first person with a visible disability to become a deputy minister in Canada.

We're going to talk today about her ambition to make the Canadian public service the most accessible in the world. We'll explore how technology can play a crucial role in this, what to watch out for, and where to get started. Yazmine, welcome to the show.

YAZMINE LAROCHE: Thank you, Olivia. I'm just so delighted to be here. I'm very excited.

OLIVIA NEAL: So, let's start off at the beginning. Maybe for people outside of Canada, just a bit of a context on what a deputy minister is. A deputy minister is not a political role. It's the most senior public service role, so equivalent to a permanent secretary in the UK, or a departmental secretary in Australia. when you became the Deputy Minister of Public Service Accessibility, this was a newly created role. I think. Could you tell us a bit about how did this role come into being and what does this show?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: Oh, I'd be delighted to, thank you. Well, in 2015, the current government was elected. And they, as part of their campaign of their platform, they committed to introducing legislation to make Canada, as they said, the most accessible country in the world. And they wanted the public service to lead by example. Well, that legislation was actually introduced into our parliament in June 2018. And I was appointed into my position in August of 2018. And my mandate was really to help the public service to get ready for the implementation of the Accessible Canada Act.

And it's an amazing piece of legislation. Because what it's designed to do is to improve the lives of Canadians living with disabilities by removing the barriers that prevent their full participation, and it applies to all sectors that are under the regulation of the federal government, the national government, so transportation sectors, telecommunications, the banking sector, and of course, us, the public service. And it is, the first job of its kind, and it's a real privilege for me to be able to help with this.

OLIVIA NEAL: Well, what an amazing opportunity. Could you tell us a little bit about how big is the Federal Public Service in Canada? How many people are we talking about? Where are they based?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: It's big, Olivia. It's very big. We're national in scope the public service, the Federal Public Service delivers country-wide policy and programs. So, whether it's collecting taxes, food inspection, licensing pilots, our weather service, our meteorological services, scientists, nurses, delivering policies and programs. It's extensive. And currently, we're about 275,000 people. So, we're the largest employer in the country, and about 5.3% of our employees right now actually identify as living with a disability.

OLIVIA NEAL: I never knew that it was the largest employer in Canada. That's fascinating. So, so being able to have a public service that is confident, and representative of the country as a whole is a really important thing in making sure that all of those services, all of those touch points that you mentioned are inclusive and don't have barriers to participation.

YAZMINE LAROCHE: Absolutely. You know, we like to say it's important that we are representative of the people that we serve.

OLIVIA NEAL: So, when you came into this role in 2018, I feel that it's a really unusual and exciting opportunity to step into a brand-new role and have that blank piece of paper. How did you start? What did you set out as your priorities to get going?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: Oh, - you're, you're right. You know, it's exciting, and it's also terrifying. So, you know, being a good public servant, we like data, that's where it started, I wanted to understand that what is the current situation for people with disabilities in the public service, and the people that we serve? And we had some interesting datasets.

So, for example, I mentioned our self-identification rates in the public service. But we also know thanks to Statistics Canada, that, 22% of Canadians identify as living with at least one disability. Then, we wanted to look at what's the experience of people with disabilities in the Canadian public service? we discovered that public servants with disabilities have the lowest promotion rates in the entire public service.

Then we looked at jobs where are these individuals with disabilities? And we found that, they were much underrepresented, the higher up you went, the hierarchy. Then, we looked at our employee survey results. And what did we discover? That people who self-identify with a disability have the highest reported rates of harassment and discrimination.

So, that was a great starting point. And from there, we focused on engagement. Because you cannot build a strategy, if you don't include the people you're hoping to help. And our guiding principle was – air quotes – "nothing without us." It's our motto. we actually engaged with over 12,000 employees in our first six months. So, we did surveys, town halls. We asked for people to email us, and we wanted to understand what were the barriers they faced.

And what we heard was that employees with disabilities have a really hard time to access the tools that they needed just to do their jobs. We heard, and this is relevant to the topic today, we heard a lot about challenges with information and communications technologies, very uneven accessibility, very uneven usability. And, people told us that they didn't feel like they belonged.

So, those consultations really helped us to design the strategy, and with a perhaps ambitious goal becoming the most accessible and inclusive public service in the world. And out of that, we have five strategies to guide us. And it really is based on what we heard, and one is all about employment. The second is all about the built environment. I said we're the largest employer in the country. We own and lease a lot of property across this country, and I can tell you, based on my travels, it's very uneven when it comes to accessibility.

So, that's a challenge. The third, as I mentioned, is all about information and communications technologies. The fourth is actually how do we help public servants so that they can design and deliver accessible programs and services? And the final element of our strategy is the most important and probably the most challenging, and that is how do you build a culture of accessibility in our public service?

OLIVIA NEAL: So, you started with the data, the evidence, what data have we got to start off with, and through that you identified some areas to focus on. Then you really brought in the voices of all of the people who are affected by this. I mean, 12,000 people, that's a big consultation and a big amount of data coming out of that to synthesize and use, and to make sure that people feel like their voices are being heard and acted on

YAZMINE LAROCHE: You know, that's always a risk, isn't it, Olivia, when you're doing any kind of consultation or engagement, is – so, what are you going to do about it? I'm very fortunate. I chair a network of employees and champions of people with disabilities, and so we have regular feedback sessions, and we're constantly updating people in terms of how well we're doing.

OLIVIA NEAL: That's great, and then you had five really clear areas of focus that have been defined in your strategy, and what we're going to talk about a bit today, although I'd like to get into all of this, but the one that we're going to focus on is really that third one around information and communication technologies, because you mentioned that, in some of the initial findings, that people had really mixed experiences, that – that sometimes these actually were barriers inasmuch as sometimes they can be enablers, but maybe we could start with the positive side of that. Have you seen examples of where technology can help create a more accessible workplace?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: Oh, my goodness, yes. The answer is definitely yes.

OLIVIA NEAL: That's a relief.

YAZMINE LAROCHE: Yeah, and you know, one of the things that I like to say is that technology can be incredibly enabling, but it can also be incredibly disabling. I think what's key to that is that it's not about the technology, it's about the people, it's about the people who are designing it, the people who are buying it, and the people who are using it. So, if you don't build in accessibility from the start, then you could end up creating something that creates really negative experiences for people. You know, I'm really happy with some of the work that we've done in the public service, and that we're continuing to do on this front.

So, one of the things that I'm seeing a lot more of is this focus on user experience, and embedding user testing, right up front, to make sure that something is designed to be accessible. One of the things that I'm really proud of, and I think this was kind of an "ah-ha" moment on so many different levels, and it's COVID related.

We're big, we're big or complex, we have a gazillion different legacy systems in terms of how we operate, so many different systems.

And the organization responsible for helping us upgrade and become more consistent had a three-year rollout strategy, three years, to get us all to use Microsoft Office 365. And COVID happened. And all of a sudden, everybody has to be functional, remotely, and everybody had to be able to work collaboratively. So, instead of three years, it rolled it out in six weeks.

OLIVIA NEAL: That's amazing.

YAZMINE LAROCHE: It is astonishing. So, it did a couple of things. So, first of all, yay, like talk about a boost to morale for the public service. I mean, it was such a wonderful feeling to know we can do this, We can be agile; we can move quickly to get people what they need. But the other thing that was so important from an accessibility perspective is just that there are so many more accessibility features built right into it.

And so, right away, people with accessibility requirements were further ahead than they've been a long time ago. So, it's one of those unintended consequences. And I'm so happy with the work that we've done around that. Is it perfect? Of course not. Nothing is perfect. But it is a huge step forward. that's a really good example of how technology can enable better results.

OLIVIA NEAL: That's really interesting. And you said, when we're thinking about technology, there's a real need to think about the people who are designing that technology, the people who are buying it, and the people who are using it. And I think this area is one of the pieces where actually that whole ecosystem has to come together. Technology companies like Microsoft and other technology companies have to be approaching accessibility with deep thought, and bringing people with disabilities with them, and – and having those people involved in the design of that technology, as well as having that perspective in the procurement arm, to get the benefits to the people who need it. So, is that real ecosystem kind of coming together?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: It is. when you think about that ecosystem, if you think about it in the public service perspective, it's supported by policies and standards. So, we now have the Government of Canada Digital Standards that have accessibility embedded in them. It's one of the core principles of it. So, that's number one. It's like, okay, we're going to do digital, accessibility is right there.

Second, then, we're now developing the Government of Canada ICT Accessibility Standards, and it will be harmonized with the latest European standard for digital accessibility. So, you've got kind of a core principle and then we're going to have an actual standard that people will have to meet. And it will factor into our procurement.

And so, this will help people in terms of the decision making. But the other thing it will do, because we buy a lot of stuff, we can also influence the broader community who wants to sell us stuff. They know that we have standards around accessibility that we have to meet, then they will have an incentive to help us get there.

So, it's a virtuous circle. And I think it's really important that we get all of these pieces right. The other element that is really important is the training and the education of the people who are either doing the design, or doing the purchasing, or doing the installation. So, that's another big piece of it. It's how do you help people develop what we call accessibility confidence? And I actually think this is becoming a core competency in a lot of occupations.

OLIVIA NEAL: I think that type of approach really means that you can make accessibility, not an add-on, but just a part of the way that everybody is working and thinking. And I saw, as part of Microsoft announcements on accessibility, last week, really interesting way of phrasing some of this, and there were some announcements

about building in accessibility checkers into more of the products so that they become as natural to use as a spellchecker. And I think that was just a really good example. Because of course, we all use spellcheck. But at the moment, if there's not that embedded response in people to use some of the tools that are available to them, so if that combination of design and training can come into play, you can bring these things to be more natural to people.

YAZMINE LAROCHE: Exactly.

OLIVIA NEAL: Could you maybe just share a little bit about what type of impact does that have on people's lives, on those Federal Public Service employees who do have disabilities when they do have technology available to them, that works for them? What kind of impact does that have for people?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: I'll use this analogy, because this is how I like to explain why this should not be so complicated. We assume that somebody's coming to work for us, anywhere, that when they show up, they're going to have – I'm talking about maybe the before times, they'll have a desk. they'll have some kind of a computer, they'll have a telephone, and they'll have a chair. It wouldn't occur to us to wait until somebody shows up to say, well, now, I'm going to need you to fill out this extensive form to explain why exactly you need a table, and why do you need that chair?

we take for granted that we will have certain basic equipment so that people can be functional. Well, people who have accessibility requirements, it's the same thing. It's what you need to actually do your job. And so, getting accessible technology helps you feel that, oh, I can do my job. But I think the more important thing is, it helps you feel that you belong.

And I'll go back to what I said at the beginning, when we did our assessment of what is the current situation in the Canadian Public Service, those are really high scores around harassment and discrimination. If you don't have what you need to do your job, you won't feel like you belong.

That's not good for the individual. But it's also not good for your organization. It's huge, in terms of helping somebody do their job, but I think the bigger payoff is you have employees are engaged and much happier.

OLIVIA NEAL: you mentioned earlier that the very tangible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was the much quicker rollouts of Microsoft 365 and those features to people across the whole government. Do you think that there were also broader impacts or that there continue to be broader impacts of this different way of working, which is starting to change the culture and people's consideration around what are the things that which we provide to people? And what is normal? is that starting to change?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: That is a great question. . But I think COVID, it did a number of things. It really up ended a lot of our thinking about work, and a few things, where it can happen, how it gets done.

But for me, the most important thing is who can do it? I think it started to make people realize a very specific example. A lot of our jobs are in the national capital region. This is where Parliament is.

And so, the assumption was that most jobs have to be done here. And what we've realized is place isn't necessarily that important. As long as you've got good connectivity, you can work from anywhere, and that may have huge consequences for us in the future. For people who are very rooted in communities, for example, what if you can stay in your community, and still have a great job and make a wonderful contribution?

So, that's something that's changed. I think the other thing that's changed is, so many people were dealing with new barriers to working. All of a sudden, you were fighting with the other people in your house, and you only had a fixed amount of bandwidth.

So, how do you negotiate through that? There were a lot of irritations that people experience, a lot of barriers. I think it created space for more empathy for others for whom it's always been like that.

The last thing that I would say that I found really interesting, in my organization, managers were starting to have conversations with their employees that they probably should have been having all along. having conversations like, how are you doing? Or is there anything that you need so that you can feel like you can make a better contribution? Really important conversations that we often don't take the time to have.

And I think that sets us up very well for, whatever the future is going to look like, post COVID. My, my great hope is that we won't lose this and that we'll be able to hang on to some of the positives that came out of this.

OLIVIA NEAL: Do you think that's the risk that we will snap back to the previous way of doing things and we will maybe lose some of these opportunities? Because some of these are fantastic. The idea of having a public service that is made up of people from across the whole country and brings all of those different perspectives to bear within a public service and is fresh and is alive, there's so much cause for optimism there. What can we do to make sure that we can keep those opportunities and embrace them?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: I think the good thing is, is that those conversations are happening now. people aren't sitting back and just waiting. People are – are actively engaged and thinking, what have we learned through this? What are we going to need to change? I've participated in very senior level competitions that, typically, those jobs would have been in Ottawa, and yet they're hiring people who live in British Columbia, in Atlantic Canada, and people are saying we need to try and see if we can make this work.

The other question that I think many employers are grappling with now is, even post COVID, do we really expect people to be working full-time/five days a week in the physical office? we think it's going to be some kind of a hybrid model. What does that mean for the buildings that we occupy?

I am cautiously optimistic that we will be coming back to a different kind of a work environment. And again, my hope is that it will be one that makes room for a lot of difference in terms of how we approach work, and who we think about in terms of who can do that work.

OLIVIA NEAL: I hope so. For public servants in other countries who are looking at what Canada has done in creating this position in setting out the strategy that you've done, how would you recommend that they get started in moving forward with this? How do they move from discussion into tangible action that is going to start making their own public services more accessible?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: I would say two things. So, there's – at the enterprise level, right? So, public services, civil services are big,

I think we have kind of a moral imperative to lead when we're trying to do a big culture change. I think that's huge. But to do that, you need to start with a couple of things.

So, first is, you need to understand what's the problem that you're trying to solve? You need data, you need to really understand what is that problem? you need input from the people who are experiencing the barriers. It is absolutely a partnership, and you have to work with them. That is critical.

once you know what those problems are, you need to set targets and say, this is what we're going to do. And then you have to hold people to account for achieving those targets.

The other thing I would say to anybody embarking on this initiative is don't boil the ocean. You pick those things that will make the biggest difference for the most people and pick those things that done quickly and equally. Otherwise, you can be paralyzed by fear that there's so much to do, and you'll never get it done. That's at the enterprise level.

The last point I would make, though, is you can make a difference at the level of the individual. You don't need legislation. You don't need policy; you don't need standards.

I really believe fundamentally in the power of individuals to make a difference. Have a virtual coffee with somebody that maybe you've never spoken to before. Ask them about themselves. If you're a hiring manager, one of the questions I like to ask is, who do you hire? Do you hire people who mostly think and look just like you? Is that really going to give you the best outcomes?

[TCR 00:34.56]

OLIVIA NEAL: I think that's a fantastic note to end on. And thank you so much for the pointers, the guidance and the lessons that you've shared today. I think there's really good things for people to get stuck into there, whether they're looking at this from an individual perspective, or from a program, or from a leadership perspective. So, thank you so much. If people want to learn anything more about your work, is there a website they can go to find out more?

YAZMINE LAROCHE: They can go to the Canada.ca website, and it's **GCAccessible**, or **accessiblegc**. and they can follow me on Twitter at **@yazminelaroche**, and they can keep up to date. I'm, I'm a pretty prolific tweeter.

OLIVIA NEAL: Great, well, we will put the links to your website, and to your Twitter onto our show page so people can find those there as well.

YAZMINE LAROCHE: That's fantastic,

OLIVIA NEAL: Great, well, thank you.

YAZMINE LAROCHE: It was a pleasure, thank you.

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OLIVIA NEAL: Thank you to our guest, Deputy Minister, Yazmine Laroche, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. Our goal is for you to learn something new and be inspired to think differently about your own journey. If you enjoyed today's episode, and you want to help other people find it, please share, rate and review the show. It really does help people find and discover new shows like this one. Remember to listen and follow the show wherever you get your podcasts. Remember to check out our show page for links to all of what was discussed today. And visit us at wwps.microsoft.com. And do reach out to us. Send us your questions

and your feedback. You can find me on Twitter @livneal, or on LinkedIn, or you can email at ask-ps@microsoft.com. Thank you and see you next time.

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