

## Speaker says it makes good business sense to be accessible

By Bill Rea

Complying with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) is not only the law, but it makes a lot of business sense.

That was the message that Louis Di Palma of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce was pressing when he recently addressed the Morning Business Break put on by the Caledon Chamber.

Di Palma said the intent of AODA is to create an accessible Ontario by 2025. That means there are rules in place that businesses and organizations must follow to identify, prevent and remove barriers impacting on people with disabilities. This applies to all organizations and companies with one or more employees, which provide goods or services to the public or other groups. In terms of employees, it applies to those who are full-time, part-time, seasonal or on contract, but it does not apply to volunteers or deliverers. Di Palma added that doesn't include company board members.

The definition of a person with a disability is the same as the one that applies to the Ontario Human Rights Code, and it includes ones that are both visible and non-visible, and includes vision and hearing loss, brain injuries, speech impairments, diabetes, epilepsy, developmental and learning disabilities, mental health disabilities, and injuries. It also covers short and long-term, as well as permanent disabilities.

What we sometimes see as a disability is not necessarily so, Di Palma remarked.

He also warned against prejudging, or assuming the only disabilities that need to be addressed are physical.

Don't make assumptions, he said.

Five accessibility standards have been developed.

The first is customer service, and Di Palma said that involves being aware and making efforts to provide service to all.

He stressed if a business is on the second floor of the building, that doesn't mean an elevator has to be installed, but it means the operator has to find a way to accommodate people.

Ninety-nine per cent of the time, you can, Di Palma said, adding if it's not possible, then there's an obligation to refer the client to an alternative business that can accommodate them.

It's common sense, he said, although he noted sometime people get so busy that they forget that.

This is a requirement under law, he added, pointing out people can be fined if they don't comply.

But appropriate education for business people is available, and he said that most business people just want to know what they need to do.

Another of the standards involves information and communication. He said it's important to know how to convey information, especially to those who have trouble accessing it.

Employment standards involve recruitment and job posting.

Transportation standards deal with making sure employees can get to work, such as seeing if things like public transit and taxis are available.

The fifth standard involves design of public space, which would involve things like parks and recreation facilities, etc.

People running business and organizations should be in compliance with the customer service standard, including the training of staff, providing emergency response information in accessible format when asked, providing employees with customized emergency information when required (such as knowing what to do if the building has to be evacuated), developing accessibility policies and considering accessibility issues when installing things like self-service kiosks (such as are the keypads reachable by all).

Employment standard provisions require that operations have to be aware of in the recruitment, assessment and selection process, providing accessible formats and communications supports on request and providing workplace emergency response information.

Di Palma said there are websites with information that can help in that regard.

One point he stressed is about 15 per cent of the population has some form of disability. That is a huge client base, as well as a talent pool when seeking staff.

Businesses with 20 or more staff are required to submit a compliance report to the government by the end of the year, but Di Palma said that requirement is not very onerous. He said it involves about half a dozen easy questions that pertain mainly to customer service. He added there is a hot line and website to assist if there are any problems. As well, municipalities have accessibility committees that can help.

An accessible workplace is one that utilizes everyone's skills and talents; and in which barriers to full participation are identified and removed.

Di Palma pointed out that businesses generally have a hard time finding talent. He said there are some 50,000 students in Ontario colleges and universities that have some form of disability, but that also represents a lot of talent that some businesses might have trouble accessing because of barriers they might not even be aware of.

‘It’s really become a business imperative,’ he remarked, noting business people can’t ignore that 15 per cent.

Di Palma observed that Ontario is facing a labour shortage in the future. Baby boomers are retiring from the workforce, and many of those who are staying are running into accessibility issues. As people age, things like their eyesight and mobility are not what they once were. These people have to be accommodated in order to keep the experienced talent.

‘It’s not just a nice thing,’ Di Palma said. ‘It’s a business imperative.’

He also said there are advantages to hiring people with disabilities, according to several research reports.

There’s data stating these people are highly motivated, with 75 per cent of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME)s reporting staff members with disabilities meet or exceed expectations. These people are also more likely to stay with a company longer and have better attendance records. As well, statistics indicate they are more safety conscious.

The AODA covers all aspects of the employment life cycle, including recruitment, retention and promotion. There are some who would think it’s too expensive, but Di Palma said that’s not so. He said it costs less than \$500 to accommodate the average employee, which is a fair amount compared to what it costs to take on and train someone else.

He also said accommodation doesn’t mean standards have to be lowered. It means adjustments need to be made so some people can handle the essential duties of the job.

When it comes to recruitment, Di Palma said the law requires that people are aware that accommodation is available during the interview process, and the applicant has to be consulted on appropriate accommodation.

While an employer can’t ask a person seeking a job if they require accommodation, there are ways to determine if there are needs.

He said it’s possible to talk to a person who’s been disruptive and discuss things like ethics and protocol, and it could come out that person has anger-management issues.

Di Palma said AODA doesn’t require buildings to be retrofitted to remove barriers, but the Building Code deals with new constructions and renovation. If an existing building is undergoing a major renovation, the local planning department will have information on what needs to be complied with.

He also said employers are obligated to have response plans in place in the event of emergencies. For example, audible fire alarms aren’t going to help a person who can’t hear. Such plans for individuals can’t be shared, except with those who are part of that person’s support.

Steps also need to be in place for an employee returning to work. that can take many forms, such as modified work schedules, etc.



Louis Di Palma addressed the recent breakfast meeting of the Caledon Chamber of Commerce