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POLI 4390

1 April 2023

### **Report on Placement at the Legal Information Society of Nova Scotia**

For my practicum placement in public policy for POLI 4390 as a law, justice and society major, I was placed at the Legal Information Society of Nova Scotia (LISNS). LISNS is a charitable non-profit organization providing Nova Scotians with information and resources about the law since 1982. LISNS believes that providing easy access to legal information and tools for Nova Scotians of all ages and backgrounds to better their understanding of the law and how it affects them is fundamental to a fair justice system.

I worked under the supervision of Kelly Eagles who is a paralegal, project coordinator and social media content specialist. Since LISNS operates remotely, I worked from home for my placement and communicated with Kelly through email and video calls. Kelly was extremely helpful, easy to reach and flexible in her availability. Once we established my project, I worked quite independently to complete my responsibilities. Before my placement beginning in January, LISNS had spent time improving the accessibility of their website for disabled users. To continue this, I was given the task of completing a research report including a set of recommendations on how to improve accessibility to the website for neurodivergent peoples' specific accommodation needs.

### **Preliminary Research Summary**

Accessibility is a term used to refer to the design of products, devices, services and environments ability to be used, obtained, understood and enjoyed by everyone, including people who experience disabilities (Accessibility Services Canada; Accessibility). In this sense, accessibility refers to equality in access and user experience. Although, different kinds of disabilities require different levels of accommodations to ensure accessibility (NEADs).

Neurodiversity is a term that has grown to be commonly used in discussions about improving accessibility for differently abled persons. Sociologist Judy Singer coined the term Neurodiversity in the late 1990s as being characterized by “[u]nusual skills and aptitudes come along with many atypical forms of brain functioning” and includes conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Neurodiversity). Today, it is understood that neurodiversity can also include mental health conditions, sensory processing disorders, Tourette syndrome, dysgraphia, dyscalculia and down syndrome (Neurodivergent). In summary, neurodiversity encompasses three types of disabilities: Intellectual or learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities or mental illness and neurological disabilities (NEADS).

Singer intended for the term neurodiversity to shift discourse away from these diagnoses as learning deficits, disorders and impairments to being differences that require accommodations (Neurodiversity). Today, we understand neurodiversity as causing people to experience and interact with the world in different ways. Providing accommodations adheres to the premise that there is no right way of thinking, learning and behaving (Baumer and Frueh).

As organizations and institutions become increasingly dependent on sharing information online in the digital age, the importance of accessibility to online information for neurodiverse

people is becoming increasingly important. This preliminary research allowed me to understand what accessibility is and how this applies to neurodiversity and accessing information online.

### **Secondary Research Findings Summary**

I began this phase of research by looking at recommendations for web design for non-profit organizations. I turned to the article by Cindy Leonard on website design considerations for nonprofits published by the Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network (NTEN). Concerns for these websites' design included: site purpose, target audiences, site objectives, responsive and mobile-friendly designs, fresh and engaging content, features, search engine optimization, site maintenance and accessibility.

I then looked more specifically at web design and accommodations for neurodiverse users. I identified two helpful sources to ground my secondary research: 1) The Seven Principles of Universal Design, and 2) the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). In 1997, the 7 Principles of Universal Design were developed at North Carolina State University with the purpose of “guid[ing] the design of environments, products and communications” to ensure the production of accessible products and services. There are 5 applicable principles to improving access to information online for neurodivergent users: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information and tolerance for error (Mace). WCAG is a globally adopted set of technical standards of web accessibility developed by the World Wide Web Consortium intended to assist website designers, developers and content authors to remove barriers people with disabilities face when accessing information online. Standards identified by the WCAG as applying to neurodiversity and accessing information online focus on key qualities of “Consistency, predictability, and ability to control” encompassed by the following

considerations: Audio control, timing adjustable, pause, stop and hide, input, consistent navigation and consistent identification.

I expanded on this information and researched how to improve the format and presentation of information to improve accessibility for neurodiverse users. I identified 4 key design elements that should be considered when creating a website that is accessible to neurodivergent users:

1. **Font:** Sans-serif fonts are recommended for improving accessibility for neurodiverse website users. Sans-serif fonts appear less crowded because they do not have serifs (ie. the small lines or flourishes at the end of fonts). Commonly used sans-serif fonts are Arial and Calibri. Helvetica, Verdana and Comic Sans. When choosing a font it is also important to consider character ambiguity, ensure hyperlinks are visually different from other fonts and avoid large sections of bold, underlined, italicized or capitalized text (WebAIM; “Dyslexia Friendly Style Guide”).
2. **Text Size & Character Spacing:** My research informed the recommendation to use 12-14 point font, but to allow users to make this font larger if needed (“Dyslexia Friendly Style Guide”; Accessibility Toolkit). The WCAG recommends that text can be resized without assistive technology up to 200% without loss of content or functionality (WCAG). I also made recommendations on character spacing including inter-word spacing and inter-letter spacing, the size of headings and the spacing between headings and text and the alignment of text and paragraphs (“Dyslexia Friendly Style Guide”; WCAG).
3. **Sentence & Paragraph Structure:** Sentence and paragraph structure includes having short paragraphs and utilizing point form lists to present information, using adequate spacing to

prevent clutter around content that is intended to be separated, and writing concise, clear and straightforward sentences.

4. Colour: Contrast between the text colour and the background colour is recommended. A light, single-colour background (ie. cream or soft pastel-hued, not white, green, pink or red) and black text are recommended (“Dyslexia Friendly Style Guide”).

### **Summary of Identified Shortcomings and Recommendations for Improving Accessibility**

Based on the findings from my earlier phases of research, my identified shortcomings and recommendations for improving accessibility can be summarized as follows:

1. *Consistent navigation systems*: The LISNS homepage presents topic boxes as the beginning of a user's journey. The topic boxes are only on the homepage. From the subpages, users must use the navigation bar. This creates barriers since topics organization in these systems is not consistent and because there are multiple ways to complete the same function. Discrepancies between the navigation bar and box topics and lack of page formatting consistency across the website conflict with the WCAG assertions that access to information online requires consistent navigation [ie. It is recommended that navigation menus (in headers and footers) are consistent across all website pages and ensure the skip to navigation link is always located at the beginning of each page to produce predictability (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines)]; and consistent identification [ie. It is recommended that page components (ie. links, buttons and icons) have the same functionality and appear consistently in the same place, with the same labels, names and text. There is an emphasis on the importance of labelling to ensure predictability (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines)] and input “It is

recommended that nothing automatically happens on the website because interactive elements receive input by providing a warning that new windows will open. The provides predictability (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines)”. I critiqued the nuances of these two navigation systems more critically in my report.

2. *Homepage design:* As stated, the LISNS homepage prompts users' attention toward the topic boxes. Although, the NTEN article stressed the importance of non-profit organizations' users understanding the site's purpose or mission statement and site objectives. Currently, this information is presented in the footer of all the LISNS website pages or under the “About Us” topic in the dropdown navigation bar. For these reasons, it is recommended that LISNS reformat their homepage in a way that changes the order of presentation of these elements.
3. *Read time disclaimer:* It has become an increasing trend in improving accessibility to information online to disclose at the top of articles or web pages how long it will take to read a paper. This would be beneficial for many neurodiverse users, specifically users with ADHD. When determining how long it would take to read something, it is important to account for the differing reading speeds of users with varying accessibility needs.
4. *Dependence on the hover function:* Hovering over elements on the LISNS website to reveal more information occurs on the home page topic boxes and in the accessibility sidebar. The hover and focus function does not adhere to the WCAG success criterion.
5. *Issues with Drop Downs on Subpages:* The subpages users are navigated to from the homepage are formatted through a dropdown navigation system. Users have presented with a list of topics they then click on and the information under this heading is

presented. When you click on a new topic, the previous topic selected automatically recoils which does not align with WCAG recommendations.

*Design Consistency:* Ensure that design across all the subpages is consistent in terms of how information is formatted as text and concerning the colours used on the website, as well as the functions and navigation of the subpages.

6. *Making an account:* Users are given the option to log in. I had the idea of recommending that by allowing users to make accounts they could more effectively track their journey and research throughout the LISNS website. This could benefit neurodiverse users by, for example, allowing them to bookmark certain pages under their account making it easier to find where information is located and improving overall accessibility relating to navigation. This could also be beneficial for the contact functions on the LISNS website. For example, the Chat with Us function is not constantly in operation (ie. “Live chat is available on our website at various times Monday to Friday, based on staff availability”) and users are redirected to the Ask a Legal Question subpage. By having accounts, users could submit questions through this function and then have LISNS get back to them when staff are available. This would allow people to ask legal questions on the LISNS website even when live chat is unavailable instead of having to move to a secondary platform to call or email.
7. *Before you Begin Questions:* This is my most significant idea pitch for improving accessibility for the LISNS website. Many websites ask users pre-screening questions before they are taken to the website page they are trying to access. For example, websites selling alcohol or cannabis in Nova Scotia ask that users enter their age to verify they are 19. I suggest that there are three preliminary questions LISNS could ask users accessing

their website before directing them to the home page. These questions are intended to set up all users (including neurodivergent users) up for success in accessing information by meeting their accommodations before they are directed to the home page.

a. French or English?

This question is first to ensure that users have information presented to them in their preferred language as early into their journey on the LISNS website as possible. LISNS currently provides information in french through the dropdown menu and in the accessibility bar, but users are presented information in English by default.

b. Do you have an account?

As suggested previously, allowing users to create accounts to track their previous journeys by bookmarking pages and allowing access to the chat function when staff are not live are beneficial. Concerning accessibility, this can also allow accommodations made through the accessibility sidebar to be connected to the user account so they do not have to reestablish these settings each visit.

c. Do you require accessibility accommodations?

It is not reasonable to expect all neurodiverse users with accessibility needs to create an account. Therefore, asking this question allows users to set up their accommodations before being taken to the homepage outside without having an account or needing to log into an account with pre-saved accommodation settings is important.



**Conclusion**

I thoroughly enjoyed my time working with LISNS. I gained practical experience and was able to research something that I am personally interested in as a student with ADHD under the supportive supervision of Kelly Eagles. Across the course of the semester, I submitted preliminary, secondary, and final recommendations and an infographic summarizing my work. I would highly recommend this placement to anyone. I believe that students who are unable to work in an office or prefer to work from home, and/or someone who prefers to work with some degree of independence would succeed most in this work environment.

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