# Transcript: User generated accessibility information

**Robin Christopherson:** Welcome to another episode of The AbilityNet podcast, disability technology inclusion.

I'm your host Robin Christopherson, head of Digital Inclusion at AbilityNet. A pioneering UK charity with a mission to make a digital world accessible tool. Join me on this series to revisit key themes from TechShare Pro 2022. A place where accessibility professionals and allies gather once a year to share and learn together, you can download a transcript of this episode from www.abilitynet.org.uk/podcast. So, sit back, grab your favourite beverage and let's get started.

Mark Walker: Hello, I'm Mark Walker from AbilityNet. Welcome to another episode of our podcast. Today we'll be hearing from three of our guests from TechShare Pro in November 2022. They were talking about the way that user generated content can help people find accessibility features in locations.

So one of the people is Cam Beaudoin who is a podcaster and accessibility specialist based in Canada but with a really popular podcast that goes out around the world. He was meeting and speaking to Euan MacDonald from Euan's Guide which is in the UK, and Maayan Ziv, who's from Access Now, which is in Canada and has a North American footprint principally.

And both of those systems, Euan’s Guide and Access Now are based around providing information to disabled people about the accessibility they may find when they get to particular locations.

So, if you're going to go to a bar or a restaurant. Will you have step free access? Will they be able to cater for any issues you have around noise for example?

Now both systems have developed separately but have a similar sort of background in the sense of Euan's and Maayan’s own experiences, in terms of trying to access locations and getting access to information about those locations. So they've been built up around user centred and user generated data.

There are other systems around where people like Google, now includes which are accessibility and it's maps information, but this is much more about people explaining the sort of experience they might have when they get to those locations.

And increasingly, of course, these information, resources and systems are available to be shared, so we may have Euan’s Guide, which is based in Scotland, talking about local services and resources across the UK. Maayan, initially in Canada and then much further afield, now providing information in other locations.

So part of the conversation is trying to see ways that these can be connected up, some of the sort of positive ways that the model can be shared and also really encouraging people to share their own information, which I think is at the core of this is we really need to rely on people's own experiences of different venues and not just the venue owner's own interpretation of accessibility. So obviously there can be quite a big gap between those things. So, I'll leave you to Cam to introduce this amazing panel and I hope you enjoy this session.

CAM: Welcome everyone to this TechShare Pro event. I'm Cam Beaudoin from beautiful Toronto Canada. I'm a professional speaker and podcaster on the business of disability inclusion and accessibility and I'm pleased that I'll be hosting this event today on user generated accessibility information.

I am here with two people who built companies that crowdsource accessibility details from users and I'm so happy to be here to facilitate and moderate this talk. Let's get started.

My first guest is Maayan Ziv. She's an entrepreneur and disability activist and after graduating with a master's in digital media from Toronto Metropolitan University in 2015, she launched AccessNow, a social enterprise that creates information about accessibility of places worldwide. As CEO Maayan has created a powerful shift in thinking about the importance of accessibility from accessible technologies to infrastructure, public policy, media and more. An internationally acclaimed voice for the Disability Rights Movement, Maayan's leadership has been recognised with several awards including Canada's top 40 under 40, MIT's top 35 innovators under 35 and the Governor's General Innovation Award, Toronto's Communicator of the Year award and WXN's top 100 most powerful women in Canada. Welcome Mayan to the show.

My second guest is an adventure rugby fan and whiskey enthusiast, Euan MacDonald MBE, co-founded Euan's guide with his sister Kiki in 2013. After his motor neuron disease (MND) diagnosis in 2003, Euan moved from London back to Edinburgh to be with his family and fundraise for MND research. In 2006, Euan and his father established the Euan MacDonald's Center for MND research and helped set up the Voice Bank Project which today is known as Speak Unique. Ten years after his diagnosis, Euan's Guide was launched by Euan and his sister Kiki as a place for disabled people, their families, friends and carers to share their knowledge of accessible places to go. The award-winning charity is based in Scotland and used by tens of thousands of disabled people all over the UK and beyond.

Maayan and Euan, thank you so much for being here and welcome to the panel.

All right Maayan, if people want to contact you, where's the best place to find you so the best place find you?

MAAYAN: So the best king of place to engage is to go to accessnow.com or on social media where AccessNow app on every platform and then my personal is just my Maayan Ziv, so I'm everywhere.

CAM: All right, perfect and Euan, I know that if anyone wants to connect with you just go to Euan Guide and go and find your social page there Euanguide.com and all your connections are there as the best place to find you.

So let's just kick this off and let's get started here, Maayan maybe I'll start with you. What is AccessNow and how did it start?

MAAYAN: So similarly to you, I started just because I didn't have a lot of information for myself, I wanted to share information about accessibility. So it started out of a need to solve my own problem, I've been a wheelchair user my whole life and in short what AccessNow evolved into is a mobile app and website. It allows people to share information about their own experiences as well as engage with businesses that are publishing information about what services what accessibility offerings they have as well within their own establishments. We do this all over the world and it just really started with me, one person, one voice and has really grown since then.

CAM: Great, and so many proper solutions there it starts off with the with the original intentions to solve our own problems then we release it to the world and Euan, what about you? How did Euan's Guide start?

EUAN: Euan's Guide is a disabled access charity. We're best known for our website, euansguide.com, where disabled people; their families friends and carers can find and share the accessibility of venues around the UK and beyond. But we also make tens of thousands of excessive safer around the UK's largest access survey and what's more we have attracted sorts of disabled access information with tens of thousands of people using Euan's Guide every month to find and share disabled access information. When I became a wheelchair user, I struggled with finding information about disabled access. I was always frustrated at never being able to find relevant access information before I visited somewhere myself. My sister and I came up with the idea for Euan's Guide, after two gigs. At first, I was nervous about what was often was festival complete with accessible viewing platforms and an accessible golf cart to take us between stages, the second was a disaster over tickets for the accessible viewing area but when I got there they offered to carry me and my wheelchair upstairs. Given that my chair weighs 160 kg that wasn't an option and in the end, they offered me money to go away. After both of these experiences, I felt I wish I'd known more about the venue before I visited, I started Euan’s Guide to learn from other disabled people about their favourite places and good places to go.

CAM: That's really great. I mean especially what I resonated with there was you said "relevant information" and I think that is so important because it reminds us that it's the actual users, people with disabilities, who have to feed this information into guides and websites like the ones that we're talking about here as it doesn't serve much of a purpose if a regulator or even sometimes an organisation puts information in as well. Euan, I'm going to stick with you here and I want to know more about how does the business model work for you in Euan's Guide. Do people just log in? Maybe talk to me a little bit about that.

EUAN: We are a registered charity, so all the donations we receive go into improving our services for our community. We rely on donations from people that use our services plus we are generously supported by trusts and foundations that are helping us make develop and more accessible place.

CAM: Got it and Maayan, what about you? How does your business model work? How does AccessNow operate?

MAAYAN: So a little different, same kind of focus and goal, but when I founded AccessNow, I registered it as a social enterprise within a for-profit space. So the way that we work is we work directly with business owners to actually help them assess their spaces directly in collaboration with people with disabilities to verify how accessible they actually are. So we do this for parks, we do this for trails, we do this for restaurants and stores and hotels. We started with no business model. We started with a platform focused on just getting people to share information and increasingly so what we've seen is that business owners have reached out organically and said you know how can I make sure that what's shared is true? And how can I make sure that I'm aware of you know the barriers that might be coming up for people within my own business? And so it was through that kind of organic relationship that we developed a really cool model in which both people with disabilities and business owners can work together to assess a space and ensure that it is actually truly accurate relevant and accessible, and that information is then given a seal of approval or a verified stamp on AccessNow.

CAM: See I love that and it's really connecting the two, the actual users the people with disabilities who have a voice, and an opinion on how something should be built and then the business owner who it sounds like wants to do good, right? I mean it sounds like that's you know something that we're coming up against that's a good social change, right? We want business owners to get that proper feedback.

MAAYAN: Yeah, I would say that there are a lot of business owners that don't know where to start. There are a lot of business owners and organisations that are quite scared because they don't know what accessibility means. They're afraid that they're you know in violation of some form but often it's just overwhelming and so you know in Canada, there are laws that impact certain types of businesses depending on size, depending on space, and the nature of business in which they actually must be accessible, but the challenge is that the laws don't always reflect lived experience, they don't give you that that customer service perspective. Yes, you'll have to have a certain width of a door or a certain you know let's say an automatic feature but where is that button placed? And is that door open for long enough to allow someone to actually navigate around a plant? So it's those types of lived experiences that we try to bring into the forefront, and it allows business owners to also learn what it means to actually serve a customer well. Beyond just looking at legislation, how do I ensure a good experience for people with disabilities as customers at the end of the day?

CAM: Right. I often equate that till you know the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, right? We want to make sure our clients and our customers are well served and yet the letter of the law doesn't always reflect the best way to do that. Tell me a little about some of the unique conflicts or challenges that you've come up against Maayan and in order to create this platform.

MAAYAN: In early days when I launched, I literally didn't know anything about what it takes to build a technology platform or a company and that's often the case with entrepreneurs that are just learning as we do. But I think the added challenge within the accessibility space is that a lot of people are not really aware, not really fully educated, not aware of the size of the market, not aware of the impact that accessibility can have on people's lives or even the return, you know that that is experienced when you do invest in accessibility. I think in addition to just building a business well you know managing all of the things that you have to do as an entrepreneur, a lot of my work and the work of our team is about creating that education and awareness and so often when I'm speaking to a new business owner, it's not just about explaining what our product is it's explaining about why people with disabilities matter and what our rights are here for and that's an interesting and sometimes difficult conversation to navigate through because advocacy is so core to what we do but we always want to make sure we're doing it in a way where we're inviting people to be part of the solution. So I'd say you know creating that awareness and education where people are just bought in as opposed to negotiating how many people really are impacted? Well roughly 20 percent of the population. So it's those types of conversations that were often kind of struggling to push through.

CAM: I always think about you know this argument doesn't matter if you're in the digital space or the physical space the argument is the same, you know we don't find enough reasons to do this and all we need to do is come up with those reasons as experts and professionals and advocates ourselves. Euan, I want to come to you, and I want to understand from your point of view as well, what about some of the unique conflicts or challenges that you experience when that you had to overcome to create your platform?

EUAN: Well I've been setting up a business of any kind of few people other key component while we have been lucky to have had wonderful staff, recruitment can be a difficult process to navigate as much as you can put in place a rigorous process that will always be an element of subjective judgment the next challenge is managing and looking after the people you work with. This has been particularly tricky during lockdown and Covid, in general many of us are here in the Euan's Guide through the transition through fellow and onto the remote working with something new to every business. While remote working has been a success and a valuable addition it has also brought home to us the value of face-to-face interaction we all missed. A big challenge for us is accessible tech, for example we have lots of users that use assistive technology, me being one and use ideas technology we work really hard to try and lead Euan's Guide as accessible and inclusive to as many people as possible. Alternative formats are always on our radar, we've really made in roads with our vision over the last 12 months and get reviews.

CAM: Yeah, I like you said about alternative formats and you're always out there looking for the next best way to serve your clients best. Now, when I think about clients what are the best ways that you and the platform get people to contribute to the feedback and to the spaces that they're reviewing?

EUAN: Our major challenge is to get people to submit their first review. Once people have shared their experiences of disabled access because they can't start sending more information and more detailed reviews.

CAM: Yeah, I like that. Always getting people to start on the platform is the hardest, it sounds like it's a Snowball Effect. You get people to answer a few then they keep going. What about yourself, Maayan? Can I contribute to your platform? Can anyone contribute to it? How does it work for yourself?

MAAYAN: Absolutely, definitely I think when I share kind of in Euan's response, is to thinking that one of the challenges has always been to engage people without disabilities to be part of the solution. Of course, it involves education. It's not like people are rushing to do it because also and I understand that there's been some hesitance about saying the wrong thing or making sure that the information isn't right or you know, I'm not familiar with accessibility. So, one way in which we've gone about solving that is we've created a concept called a Map Mission. Basically a Map mission is an invitation to join in an activity or an event that actually is scheduled in real time, brings people together and usually brings both people with and without disabilities to kind of map any given area. In the early days, we started these events kind of as growth hacking exercises. We'd identify people in the communities and say hey would you throw a Map Mission; you know one hour in your neighbourhood or people would just volunteer their time or they would want to do it you know instead of their birthdays or something it would be kind of like a fun way to get people together and just have a good time. But along the way we realised that Map Missions are also incredible empathy generating activities and they really spark a kind of experiential learning. So through building these Map Missions, you know now it's become kind of a formalised program within our company where we've got you know employee groups running map missions and school groups, across the world doing Map Missions and it's become a way for people with disabilities to be in the driver's seat and to be the educators and to invite people without disabilities to kind of stroll through a neighbourhood and maybe that coffee shop that you go to, you never realised actually has one step at the front and all of a sudden now, you know you've had this experience where the real kind of tangible elements of accessibility have kind of been illuminated. We find that after experiences like that, it's really hard to continue to ignore what you now learn and what you now know and those have been really successful opportunities for us to do exactly that to engage people who might not be familiar with accessibility and invite them to be part of the solution.

CAM: Right, you're bringing up a really interesting topic there. I've seen on Google Maps, for example, organisations that have technically met accessibility guidelines they have the button on the door and they have you know the tables and for example restaurants and like that and they have a sticker on there that says it's wheelchair accessible and yet exactly after renovation in Toronto, we have lots of condos that are going up and there's a one-inch gap to get inside the building and that is you know to many people, it's impossible to get over that gap with their assistive technology wheelchairs or walkers or even strollers. When we when we look outside of the pure assistive devices. But in your opinion have you seen places improve over time for accessibility? Is that something you've seen? Like a positive shift towards places being more accessible?

MAAYAN: I mean I think it's a bit of both. I think we have definitely come a long way even within the last few years in terms of kind of collective consciousness about the issue. I think also social media has given people with disabilities an opportunity to tell our own stories. And being in that position I think we've been able to generate and demand change in terms of how businesses work and who is reflected and what is the diversity of humanity that we see, and you know in our fashion and on television and so that representation I think is changing and it is posing questions to what's missing? You know where are people with disabilities not yet showing up, but you know is the world fully accessible? No. We have seen businesses go from Green ratings on our app to Red, absolutely. You know a change of owner or renovation. I remember there was this one pizza place the corner near where I live, and it was accessible and they had a ramp and it was gorgeous and then they had new owners come in and they decided to do a big renovation and they put in a step and they didn't realise that by doing that they had actually now reduced the amount of customers that would be able to come there. So it's those moments where again it requires tremendous education and awareness. It's an ongoing persistent effort. We're just one company but you know there are people all over the world who are committed to doing that and it's going to take I think the responsibility of every person to get involved. Similarly to the way that we must protect our planet and look at climate issues, I think accessibility is just as fundamental to kind of the rights of people in our relationships between each other.

CAM: Yeah, absolutely that's why many accessibility advocates were saying that this fits so well into that diversity, equity, inclusion conversation. Now Euan, what about you? Over time have you seen places improve their accessibility? In the Europe and in the UK, there's different rules around accessibility, even physical accessibility. I read an article recently of someone who experienced cobblestones, there's not many cobblestones here in Canada but I know in all the places with a lot older buildings, that's a reality so have you seen places improve accessibility over time?

EUAN: Yes, every review that we receive is passed on to the venue. We love it when venue's tell us that they have taken the review and will make change. It doesn't have to cost lots of money it can be as simple as not using their accessibility of this storage topic. We also find that venues generally don't know how good they are. We try to encourage venues to tell everyone about their accessible facilities and tell folks what they have so that disabled visitors can make up their own minds.

CAM: Yeah, I love that. Tell everyone you know that should be a part of their marketing campaign almost. Tell everyone that you have an accessible place of business. Now I want to move over and just say Euan, what's your favourite place to travel and why?

EUAN: Homelands in Fife, is accessible accommodation that I visit every year. It's the best I've ever seen. It's designed with disabled people in mind. It's so good being able to have somewhere to stay in the way everything is taken care of and there are no barriers to having a good holiday.

CAM: See I love that. It just sounds like some place like that have included people with disabilities in the way that they build it. I know Microsoft does a lot of work like that as well in some of their inclusive spaces, they involve people with disabilities in the construction of the of these spaces and events. Maayan, what about you? What's your favourite place to travel and why?

MAAYAN: I want to say every place, whether it's accessible or not I'm gonna get there. I think for me my favourites... I love Barcelona, I think it's a gorgeous city with some incredible architecture, is it the most accessible? Surprisingly quite accessible. If you're going to go into the gothic quarters, yes prepare for cobblestones but for me it's worth it, so I love that city. I have to say Israel will always be kind of a special place for me a lot of my family still lives there and every time I go back it's like a little piece of me is coming home and every time is different, every time there's something new to experience and surprisingly accessible and I will say actually increasingly so. There's a really amazing kind of new focus on making the old city of Jerusalem accessible. There used to be just kind of stairs through certain pathways and now they've created ramps there. So they are really working on making a lot of the country more accessible and to me that's just one more reason to keep going back.

CAM: I love hearing that because travel is just so important for us in our minds, bodies and souls, you could say. We talked about restaurants earlier, what's the simplest thing that a restaurant owner could do just to make life easier, if anyones listening right now, for persons with disabilities, in your opinion?

MAAYAN: I mean I think before any effort goes into removing a physical barrier, it's really about the understanding of why you should want to do that. Imagine going into a restaurant where you feel like the staff are doing you a favour, or you feel like you're a burden for showing up. Those experiences as customers with disabilities really leave quite a bad taste in our mouths and so sometimes you can just simply start with understanding how to engage people with disabilities, how to share information in a way that will invite people to show up such as sharing on Euan's Guide or on AccessNow. These are simple things that you can do to signal to people that you've considered our needs and that we are invited to show up as customers and then once we're there how do you make an enjoyable experience where barriers are not part of it? So it starts with asking those questions and being genuinely interested in creating experiences what people feel included. I know that sounds like a very lofty goal, but it can start with small things just asking questions, doing some research, reaching out to experts, often that's where it can start.

CAM: Absolutely, that whole idea around disability etiquette and creating a delightful experience just goes so far beyond just the clients that you see day-to-day or things like that. It really is how do we create a great experience for anyone coming through our doors. And Euan, going to you now, same question: what's the simplest thing that say like a restaurant or a coffee shop could do to make life easier for persons with disabilities?

EUAN: Simply making someone feel welcome is a great start, it's not just restaurants. We encourage all venues to talk about their access information or community of disabled people, friends, family members and carers continually tell us that information is key. In our latest access survey, respondents told us 92 percent try to find disabled access information before visiting somewhere new. 56 percent avoids visiting a venue if it has not suitable for access. Back to this information, as we presume it won't be inaccessible landscape companies that started sorts of information from disabled people, friends, families and carers, tens of thousands of people use the website to look for disabled access information every month. If your information is not on the website of visitors and your potential visitors will be able to find it.

CAM: Yeah, and part of that conversation of course has to do with being heard and seen as well and dignity is the word that comes to mind, whenever I hear about that. We've only got time for one more question here, Euan I'm gonna start with you. I'd love to hear what some exciting improvements are coming up with you and Euan’s Guide over the next couple of months or in coming up in the future. What's on the roadmap?

EUAN: It's an exciting time for us generally. We've been delighted to see the amount of content coming from our community to advertisers. In terms of priorities for the next year or so, particularly tech wise we know that over 60 percent of our users are currently using Euan's Guide on mobile devices, we know we need to improve the experience, and this is a priority for us. Please get in touch with your thoughts on how we can both improve Euan's Guide and any other suggestions to make the world a more accessible place.

CAM: I love it that's really exciting. And Maayan, what about you for AccessNow? What's coming up in the future?

MAAYAN: Well its been a really unique time, for everyone. You know, the pandemic caused us to really take a moment to consider what are we doing and how do we move forward? For a company focused on getting people out of their homes and exploring the accessible places, it was a difficult time but what we did along the way was we realised that accessibility is not just impacting physical buildings and stores and restaurants but also accessibility is impacting the outdoors. So, we expanded our reach to really focus also on trails and parks and created an entire program called Access Outdoors which engages people to map their own trails, parks, look at campsites, and all different types of experiences. We're really excited about this program so I think one of our kind of newest or shiniest components is that through this program we've been able to map tons of parks and trails across Canada and now we'll be moving this program out into the U.S and further as well so I think that's really exciting kind of update for us it's a kind of a specifically designed app focused on mapping in a slightly different way but all of that information ends up shared on AccessNow app as well so they're all connected and I'm really excited to kind of hit the trail and encourage and engage park owners and trail operators and networks to join us.

CAM: That's really cool and as an avid camper myself, I'm gonna go and explore that app the next camping season, that's absolutely great. With that we're out of time, thank you both so much. Maayan, Euan, thanks so much for coming on the show today talking about this really important issue and expanding on what both of sites and mobile apps do. So with that I can end the show, you both have a great day, thanks so much for participating.

Mark Walker:

Well, that's hugely powerful. I think that conversation about where we store and reflect and share people's lived experience of accessibility moving on from very generic information into more detailed, nuanced information about the real experience of somebody in a wheelchair, for example, using a physical space.

Huge thank you to Cam for hosting that conversation. Massive thanks to Euan and Maayan for joining in and sharing their knowledge and experience.

And I hope you enjoyed and you know can reflect on your own input to their information resources and maybe find out more about them from through the show notes.

I mentioned Cam. He's a podcaster and a great ally of AbilityNet. He runs the worldwide Digital Accessibility Podcast, which I can thoroughly recommend. He has some amazing guests on there, and I would thoroughly point you in the direction.

Of course, AbilityNet has plenty of podcasts as well on related topics, including other sessions from TechShare Pro, where you can hear global experts like Maayan and Euan talking about the services they offer in relation to accessibility. Just go to abilitynet.org.uk/podcast and you'll find a whole back catalogue there of episodes.

I'm Mark Walker, thanks so much for joining us. Look forward to catching up to you in the next episodes.

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