SAM: Hi everybody! How is everyone feeling this morning! Let's have a cheer in here! I am so excited to be here. Today I'm talking about how to embed accessibility into your company culture.

Before I get to that, I wanted to tell you more about myself. So, hi again, I'm Sam. I am probably -- you are probably going to be surprised that my background is not in computer science or design, engineering or even product marketing. Instead, it is deeply rooted in the user and more specifically user experience. So, I've always been passionate about inclusion, ever since the first day of my freshman year of high school. I met Julia and Kenny, Julia on the left, Kenny on the right. I knew from then I wanted to make exclusion a reality. I went on to college at Vanderbilt University and decided to study special education in their Peabody School. I went on to get my degree and teaching licence in special education for K2-12 in severe to profound. It was not until I took a class on augmented and alternative communication that I my curiosity in accessibility sparked. In was in the classroom, as a teacher that I saw first-hand the power of assistive technology.

It is hard to re-enact the smiles on students’ faces when I gave them a communication device for the first time. I taught them how to use a screen reader on a website or allowed them to play with the head mouse. It was in these moments that my students and I quickly learned that assistive technology would be the connector between them and full independence ... so, I knew from that moment on, that if I really did want to make full inclusion a reality, everybody would need access, hence, my shift to accessibility!

So, I'm super, super lucky and fortunate to every day be able to recreate the ah-ha moment that my students had in our Verizon Media Accessibility Lab as an accessibility specialist and manager at Verizon Media. I will take a pause and explain what Verizon Media is, Verizon is the umbrella organisation. You have business, consumer, media, we are the media side and with all the brands you know and love, so, Yahoo!, AOL, HuffPost. These are some of the many brands that really are all about making sure that everyone has access to the things you know and love.

So, one of the reasons and one of the many reasons I love working at my company is accessibility is seen as a priority from the top down. So, this is our CEO, Guru Gowrappan. He posted on LinkedIn a couple of months back about Global Accessibility Awareness Day. He wrote: “Accessibility is more than ticking items on a checklist for compliance. It is integral to design, execution, service and support. This is fundamental to who we are and how we place our users first in all that we do.” Not many CEOs do that, right? So, as you can see, Verizon Media is all about making sure we have access to all things you use, your stocks, your mail, your fantasy, and a huge point of that is making sure all of our users have access, including those with disabilities.

So, one key component of accessibility is our accessibility labs. So, we have industry-leading tech labs in Sunnyvale in New York. I am based from the New York lab; my colleague is based in Sunnyvale. We like to say we use the labs for three purposes. One to educate, so we ensure that everybody knows what sent is, why it is important, and how to integrate accessibility into everything that they do at Verizon Media.

The second component is for product teams so those with development or design focus. We have all of the different assistive technology that users with disabilities may be coming to our websites and apps with. We use that assistive technology from ideation to implementation. So, we ensure that at every stage in the process accessibility is considered as a beginning idea, not an afterthought.

The last component of the Accessibility Labs we use them as a show place so we make sure we bring in users with disabilities to provide feedback on all of our apps and websites. We invite all different companies and advocacy groups to visit. We joke that the Sunnyvale lab is like a ranch with beautiful windows, light, and spacious! New York is like a New York apartment; it is bigger than my apartment, so that says a lot! But really the space is the same no matter where you are. It is integral to making sure that our company promotes access and inclusion. So, they really help reach our goal as a team, as an accessibility team to create a culture of accessibility at Verizon Media.

So, this is a great segue into our employee engagement strategy. So, the labs are one key component to the strategy, but it is our goal from the top down but also from the bottom up, that we take each employee from awareness to adoption and advocacy.

So today I will elaborate more into each of the exponents of our strategy. Because we want to get you more engaged, because it is the first presentation of the morning, I thought that we could do something fun and you are going to have to play along with me a little bit if that is all right with you. Sound good? Thumbs up if it sounds good. Great, lots of thumbs up.

So, one key component of the awareness section is our new hire tours. A unique thing about the company is that every Monday we have a bunch of new hires start. The first day at Verizon Media. We use the new hire tours to set up expectations about the company and accessibility. It happens on the first day, going through the legal and the compliance related things to do about the company, to find out more about the company and they go on a tour. If in Sunnyvale or New York you visit the Accessibility Labs, and if in the remote offices you can go on a visit remotely. It happens on the first day. So, for 20 minutes of the first day, they know that accessibility is a priority. That is huge for our company. So, this really helps to set up appropriate expectations of what is happening moving forward.

I will take you through the new hire tour. So, you are no longer part of your respective organisations, you are now a new employee of Verizon Media. So, congratulations everyone! Welcome to your first day! Excited to have you! Play along with me as I do it. This is straight from our new hire tour deck. What you are seeing is what all of our new hires see on their first day. So, welcome to Verizon Media! How is your first day going? Good. [Cheering] A great company to work at, right! A good plug. So how many of you before getting into this room had heard the word "accessibility"? If you have, I want you to raise your hand and snap your finger for me. Wow! A lot of people knowing about accessibility over here. It may come as a surprise that most of our new hires that come through don't or haven't heard of the word accessibility. After these 15 to 20 minutes, everyone knows a little bit more.

To us and our team, accessibility is making sure that our users with and without disabilities have an equal experience when they come to our websites and apps. The reason why we do this is over a billion people in the world have some form of disability. So, at our company, you're going to keep hearing the words daily active users or DAUs. If we want to grow our daily active users as a percentage, we have to discuss a percentage of the population that is often not discussed.

Disability is very diverse. You may be wondering what types of disability and categories we address. At our team and at our company, instead of putting contact into specific categories and talking about the medical and social model definition of disability, we instead like to say "reduce friction". We are reducing friction for all of our users whether or not you identify as having a disability. Again, these images on the screen are super authentic and vibrant everyday images of people with and without disabilities. It is part of one of our initiatives called the Disability Collection. We are looking to increase authentic representation of people with disabilities in the media because they feature in less than two per cent. So, if you are curious about wanting some of these images get to Getty. It is a partnership with the Getty, the Leadership Alliance and Verizon Media. As you can see, disability is very diverse.

We also like to remind folks that accessibility features are A11y. I didn't know that on my first day, there are 11 letters between A and Y. Accessibility features benefit us all. I have three images on the screen. I will start with the one on the far left, situational. In this situation, this young woman put on headphones because it was too loud in her work space. The temporary situation, you may be at a conference, it might be really, really loud. How many of you have put headphones or ear plugs at a really loud concert? A lot of folks. So, in that temporary situation, putting in ear plugs you may rely on closed captions being provided at the convert. Or you may be born with a more permanent condition where you use a cochlear implant or rely on a sign language interpreter. In all of these situations, assistive technology can benefit us all.

We also like to remind you that when you think about disability you may jump to the more visible condition, but there are actually more folks in the world with more invisible disabilities. At our company, it is so important that the user is at the centre of everything we do. We do not make assumptions on what people want or need. Instead, we rely on our community and, more specifically, our disability community to tell us. We take that feedback and integrate it into our products.

So, I keep throwing around these words “assistive technology”, so you have technology as the umbrella term. Assistive technology is just one underneath that, it is comprised of low tech and high tech. On the far-left side there is an alternative switch, you have magnification, closed captioning, a screen reader, a Braille display. This is all the assistive technology that you can find in our lab. So, anything again that our websites and apps can have access to, we make sure that our users with disabilities can have access to them using whatever assistive technology they come with.

So now I'm going to take you along six different accessibility features that we want all of our websites and apps to have. This is by no means everything that we check for when we're thinking about accessibility, but we have narrowed it down to these six because we think that everybody can look for these. One thing is video captions. All of our videos should have captions. Simple as that. All of our original content does. We want to make sure that if someone is using a keyboard only, whether it be a switch, head mouse or a typical keyboard, that they can navigate it on our websites and on our apps. So just tabbing through on your website or plugging in USB into a phone, you can check right there and then if your website and app is conducive to a keyboard.

This last image is high contrast. For our designers in the room we want to make sure that the foreground to background ratio is 4.5:1. There are contrast checkers out there to look at that. The other thing we're looking at in design accessibility is whether the icons are large enough, are you using universal symbols, can you have an accurate layout in terms of the hierarchy on the page? It is thinking about all of those things and it is really, really important when you're talking about design.

Other features that enable accessibility is dynamic text resizing. So, if you want to zoom in on our websites and apps you should be able to do that and not have any of the content distorted. On the screen, I have a Yahoo Finance stock ticker, Verizon is increasing, Apple is decreasing, Google is also increasing today! The thing we want to point out in this example is that green typically means increasing, and red means decreasing. At one point in time those plus and minus signs on the screen didn't exist next to the colours. For folks who are red and green colourblind they didn't know if their costs were increasing or decreasing. This is a huge no‑no, especially for Yahoo Finance users. If you are ever using colour alone, think about adding a shape or a symbol next to that so everybody is on the same page.

Another thing we want to find out with colours is not all colours mean the same thing in all countries. It actually means the opposite in some, red and green means the opposite, red means good and green means bad, so it can be confusing. So, making those universal indicators for meaning exist is really, really important.

The last example is screen reader support. So, we want to make sure that screen readers which is what folks who are blind or with low vision may use on our websites and apps have the accurate labels and descriptions to read the page. On the screen I have a Yahoo Sports screen grab. It is on the menu button. So, the three lines and it reads aloud "menu button". Even better would be "menu button, list drop down, four items" so it gives the users more of what to expect. So, having that alt text or that role attributed to that icon is super important.

One of our developer’s way back saw the menu button as a hamburger menu, they thought it would be fun to label it Burger King button. Do you click it if you hear that? Maybe if you are hungry for a burger, I see some of you smiling, but that's not a great user experience. We want to make sure that the labels and descriptions are accurate for all people so that they know that, one, you're at the Yahoo Sports site and two, you know what is expected on that page.

At that point in the new hire tour, as we've done the brief intro into accessibility, we have told them six main things we want them to consider when they approach accessibility in our websites and apps, we would actually give you all assistive technology to start playing around with. You would learn how to use or turn on at least a screen reader, you would become aware of all of the accessibility features that are built into your phones and computers that you already have.

So, obviously, we're not in the Accessibility Lab in Sunnyvale or New York, so what I have done is I have embedded some of the accessibility features that you can see in our Verizon Media apps and websites. So, the example that is about to be played is from Yahoo Mail. So, Yahoo Mail has great screen reader support and what you will hear is actually VoiceOver on iOS speaking out loud what is on the screen. Let me play this.

[SUBTITLED FILM]

SAM: So, in that experience, you heard our screen reader do drag and drop on Yahoo Mail. Everything was labelled and you had a great understanding of where you were on the page and you will also notice that the voice might have sounded a little bit fast to you, but that's actually really, really slow for a screen reader user. Just remember that it is much more sped up and so that's why it is so important that when users come to our websites and apps with assistive technology that it is a flawless experience, because they want to get everything done just as efficiently as everybody else.

The next example I have on the screen is from Yahoo Finance. Yahoo Finance captions eight hours of live captions a day so you will see on the main screen Yahoo Finance LIVE with live captions, with our video on demand we also have a video player that allows you to customise the captions that you're seeing on our screen, so you can change the background, the foreground, you can change the text size. One of my favourite features is that you can actually move the captions to the top or the bottom. If you are watching Yahoo Sports or watching your favourite team, most of the content is typically on the bottom of that screen, so being able to move the captions to the top and customise the colours is something that I really love.

The last example is from HuffPost. So HuffPost, this video is going to show you that you can go into your settings and actually increase the text size within the app. By increasing the text size, you can go back to your main content and see that text enlarged. It doesn't only provide customisation settings within the app; it actually supports iOS text resizing as well. If I go into my platform features and make the text larger and go back into the app you will see that the text is much larger and customisable for that user.

So, those are just three quick examples of how accessibility is reflected in our products. You would be using assistive technology yourself to see those examples.

So, congratulations, you made it to the end of our new hire tour! This is where we would leave our new hires with some key takeaways. The biggest ones being we have an accessibility team and we have an accessibility lab, and we are here to support you in your role in whatever you're doing. It doesn't need to be product facing, we have cross‑functional and partnerships relationships across the country. If you are in HR and you want to learn more about hiring people with disabilities or hiring people with accessibility knowledge, it is something we can advise you on. We can talk to you about how to make your communications accessible. We can talk to you more about how marketing can become more inclusive or what to think about when you're developing or designing with accessibility in mind. So definitely come back, we would love to have you.

We also share our company email address, our internet page with a bunch of different resources and also our slack communities. We have an accessibility Slack community of over 1,500 employees at Verizon Media. It is a really authentic community where people post different updates on the accessibility world and ask questions. Yes, our team is in there but we're really not navigating that conversation, it is pretty authentic which is great.

Yes, this is where you would leave and you would come back is the hope and what ultimately happens.

I want to take you back to our original employee engagement strategy. We saw the new hire tours as part of the awareness. There are other events that actually happen in awareness and then we will take you through adoption and then advocate advocacy. What we do to bring the community up to speed on what accessibility is and why it's important, in addition to our new hire tours, we host different events and pop‑ups.

For instance, for Global Accessibility Awareness Day, we had a global trivia event and hosted a global bug bash. It is how we included the company and spread awareness about our team and the Global Accessibility Awareness Day in general. We also celebrate UN day of people with disabilities on December 3rd or any of the key holidays in the disability community and in the accessibility community. We do different tabling events for any events that are going on internally at Verizon Media.

The other component we do is we bring in people to the labs. We're not only sharing what Verizon Media is doing on accessibility with other companies, we are also listening to different advocacy groups to share with them what accessibility features are new and different in our websites and apps and listening to them about what they are looking for in our apps and websites.

So, once you are aware, which you are pretty aware of now of what we do at our company, then we bring all of those employees to our engagement phase or our adoption phase. This is where we do more of those customised workshops and we do deep dive sessions about what accessibility looks like in their particular roles. We will do different product valuations at each stage to get them aware of what we are thinking about and how we are designing this with everyone in mind and developing it with everyone in mind and that other component is user studies, so obviously we bring in users throughout the ideation to implementation phase, but one particular thing that I love -- which is this image -- is our user nights. We pair product teams with our actual users so they can have a conversation about what their experience is first‑hand. It is not just the UX researcher providing those experiences or that summary of results, it is actually the engineer working with the person with disabilities and having that exchange.

The last one on there is our resources tools and Accessibility Labs and we make sure to continue to update and spreads those out to all of our accessibility adopters.

And then our last stage is advocacy. These are our accessibility champions. They eat, breathe, speak and A11y within our culture. This is an image from our Accessibility Champion awards. We partnered with our Verizon corporation. On our media side, we had different individual stakeholders as well as teams win this award for their above and beyond work. So, one award that I want to highlight is Elise on the far right, she is raising her hand in the air because she's so excited because she won. Elise is a reporter on HuffPost and her and Wendy Lu, who is also a producer on HuffPost, came to the accessibility team because they wanted to partner with us as they rolled out a training on disability recording best practices. We worked with them to deliver this training across our company so that all of our editorial folks were on the same page of what authentic representation looked like in our editorial content. It was great because they led that conversation but the resources in terms of making our content accessible was all available on our accessibility site internally, addressing all areas of accessibility, not just development and design.

So, what we have learned, these Accessibility Labs, we can't just have assistive technology and a little piece of paper explaining the stations. You also just can't have a person explaining what accessibility is, you really need to pair these two in order to make a really genuine experience that's leader-led, interactive, what we have learned, when you come into the Verizon Media Accessibility Lab you feel safe and comfortable to ask the questions you are wondering about, to learn a little bit more and ultimately to empower yourself to be a champion of accessibility within your organisation.

So, what I realise is that although I may not be a traditional teacher in a classroom, the Verizon Media Accessibility Lab has become my classroom. Every day I have students from all over, whether that be employers at my company, different advocacy groups, users, they come in to learn a little bit more about accessibility, to share, to engage with one another, to start conversations and listen. What is truly incredible about this experience is the work that we do in that classroom, all of us, has the lasting impact to influence tens of thousands of users across the world. So, ultimately, when we choose to include, we can really make the world more accessible.

So, with that, I'm going to leave it to tell you, we want you to come and visit. If you are ever in New York or Sunnyvale, stop by, we would love to have you and share our Accessibility Labs in person. I just made a Twitter, yesterday, it was a very exciting moment for me. I know you can't use the hashtag but you can tweet at me and invite me to the community. I left my email address, again, this is a two-way street, I want to learn from you and share more about what our company is doing, so for transparency, feel free to email me, ask your questions and come and visit. I love visitors and I love visiting London as well. With that, thank you, I will take questions. Yeah!?

MARK: Thanks, Sam, that was brilliant.

[Applause]

So, I will come here. It strikes me that a lot of us may recognise some of those things in pieces but what a brilliant way of putting it together. I love the idea of showing people when they join all of the first basics. I have a question here but when in the room with those people, what is the response you get? What do they say? What do they do?

SAM: It is really ah-ha moments. You see them light up, that they didn't realise that assistive technology was so powerful. I want to remind people that Accessibility Labs are little different to empathy labs, so we are demonstrating solutions and teaching folks how to use assistive technology on the products, not what it is like to have a disability. That is a huge distinction, empathy labs and our Accessibility Labs. What we are showing you this is how you can use assistive technology to ensure we are promoting a user experience that is for all.

MARK: Is there a role for accessibility champions? What tips do you have for embedding accessibility in the team? When they have left the induction, I know you are doing further support, do you continue to engage with them?

SAM: That is why having a person stationed at the lab is important. I am the face of the Accessibility Labs in New York and Denise is in Sunnyvale. Our team has a really strong presence at the company. But associating a person with a place is really, really important. That's all where the communication continues to happen. It is not the first time or the last time you are going to hear from us. It is consistent, we continue to reach out and follow-up. We see that we don't have to do a lot of reaching out, it will come to us, the work will come to us and they well keep us in the loop of things that they are working on, give us a heads up if they are about to launch something knew if it is not on our radar. We embed the champions into the groups across the organisation. That is how recreate a culture of accessibility at our company.

MARK: Thank you. There is a question about recruitment, let me find it ... loads of questions jumped in when listening to that last one. How inclusive is Verizon Media for disabled people? How do you identify and hire people with disabilities?

SAM: The accessibility team focuses more on the product sent, so the digital accessibility, so making sure that the websites and the apps are available to people with disabilities. The hiring and the inclusive practices run through the HR department. We are the connector between our team and HR but anything with accommodations anything that is hiring is on the HR front so I can't answer that specifically but I will say, as I see every new hire on the first day, they often say, "I wish I knew that the company had accessibility lab when applying as it would have been a done deal from the first minute I knew it." So those who identify as having a disability when hired will stay after the tour and find out more about what the team is doing as they really connect with that idea.

MARK: Do you work with other organisations in the sector to change and influence practices, sharing strategies, working with other businesses? Disability networks? What is your gang?

SAM: We are an open book. In the field of accessibility, I love the community. We are transparent about what our company is doing and bringing in other companies so that they can share as well. But it is a great connection between academia, industry and our advocates of people with disability. So, it is a really huge group. We are excited to have everybody join in on the conversation.

MARK: Thank you. I have one thing here, somebody said, is it definitely Soloway.

SAM: It is Sam Soloway. Thanks for spotting that.

MARK: Ground Control are figuring out that one. the David Bowie references are still coming out, that is nice!

SAM: It is @SamSoloway.

MARK: Your video player supports AD, do you have challenges, the barriers, where are the technical barriers you are working on, like audio description. How many things come up, are those the big things that come up all the time?

SAM: With six of us we cannot solve all the problems. We can share best practices but it is on the teams to make the changes. So, we are working with the teams with other companies to ensure what are the best practices to implement them across the organisation. We are working with VR, AR immersive experience, there is a video studio team that are trying to address audio description into what this are doing. And Larry, who works in access, there is a community of folks think being how to make AR and VR accessible.