ITS America Equity Member Spotlight - Microsoft

The ITS America's Equity Community of Practice is comprised of ITS America members who share a common interest in cross-cutting issues such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The Community of Practice members take innovative approaches focused on building a gender inclusive transportation ecosystem that is user friendly, cross-sectional, resourced with community partners, sustained with investments, and built with knowledge.

The goal of the Equity Community of Practice is to increase awareness, grow DEI in transportation ecosystems, share best practices currently utilized by our members, discuss lessons learned, engage membership on DEI initiatives, and bring value to our membership.

Our 2024 ITS America Equity Community of Practice is Co-Led by Tiffany Fuller, Director of the Strategic Planning Unit at the New York City Department of Transportation and Ralph Cochran, the External Director at the Central Ohio Transit Authority.

ITS America members will present programs in place at their organizations to attendees of the Community of Practice meetings to show how their company or organization prioritizes DEI.

The second presentation in our four-part series is from Rylin Rodgers, Disability Policy Advisor, Microsoft. Rylin highlighted the diversity, equity, and inclusion work currently being conducted at Microsoft.

1.How do we expand work opportunities for people with disabilities?

Rylin discussed how Microsoft requires every employee to take accessibility training. She explained that this requirement creates a culture with an expectation that all Microsoft employees are responsible for being aware of accessibility. For example, employees should make sure that all emails and PowerPoint slides are accessible before sending them. This is accomplished by using their Accessibility Checker tool which reviews your content and flags accessibility issues it comes across. It explains why each issue might be a potential problem for someone with a disability and suggests how it can be fixed.

2. Has Microsoft shared these accessibility learnings with other organizations?

Rylin provided an example of the UK Department of Workforce and Policy that took Microsoft's accessibility learnings and then deployed it into their system. Rylin explained that these new learnings changed the rate of employment for disabled people within the UK Department of Workforce and Policy. Based on that learning and request, Microsoft put together a package of

courses that anybody can use and put in their Learning Management Systems. Microsoft wants to provide people, particularly those that are in jobs and places that are using Microsoft products, with the best information so that those individuals can create an accessible workplace. Rylin described how this learning package allows people to think about potential opportunities and possibilities for designing in an accessible way. There are a variety of modules people can choose to include in their Learning Management System. Rylin provided example modules like how to create accessible documents and design things with AI in an accessible way. She believes everyone should be taking accessibility training to make a more equitable world.

3. Can you describe inclusive hiring practices?

Rylin spoke about how Microsoft has benefitted from differently abled talent that has been hired by the company. Rylin discussed how inclusive hiring allows for the opportunity of accommodations starting from the application process to the very end of hiring the individual. Microsoft's experience with neurodiversity hiring led the company to realize the traditional question and answer interview is not always the best practice for people to show their talent and different hiring processes need to be considered for differently abled talent.

Rylin added that Microsoft launched the Support Improvement program to bring diverse talents to Microsoft campuses and over sixty distinct roles globally. The program has been successful in attracting talent that assists in meeting Microsoft's business demands as well as building more opportunities to close the employment gap.

4. What are some of the key parts of Microsoft's accessibility journey?

Rylin explained that Microsoft's accessibility journey is valuable because it helps people remember that some of the greatest technological advances, like keyboard shortcuts that came from 1994, are still applicable, particularly for people in the blindness community. In the second tier, accessibility really ties to the role of people and making sure that people have key leaders in Microsoft.
Rylin explained that when Microsoft is looking at any new products, it is important to ask how the product is applicable to transportation systems. There should also be questions about whether the design for the product is inclusive and reflective of diverse communities.

5. How can AI help organizations?

Rylin said that every day Microsoft sees disability use cases for AI within their products, which is a splendid example of inclusive design and accessibility. Microsoft's copilots were not designed as accessibility features, but they are changing access to content.

Rylin provided an AI case study about the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Netherlands, which struggled with access to their exhibits for people with disabilities, particularly the blindness community. Microsoft partnered with this museum and used AI to do robust image and visual descriptions of every piece of art in its collection.

6. What advocacy work has Microsoft focused on?

Rylin shared work related to prohibiting section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which makes it still legal for employers to pay disabled people less than the minimum wage. Microsoft has taken policy positions to end that practice. Microsoft prohibited this in their supply chain many years ago, but now it is advocating for legislation to end this practice completely.

7. How else can AI help with accessibility?

Rylin provided an example from one of Microsoft's partners, a nonprofit called New Disabled South, which is using AI to create a plain language summary of any piece of legislation.
Rylin explained that Microsoft is going to create greater access for people with a learning, intellectual, or developmental disability. Now Microsoft has the power to take complicated policies and work with its community partners to create new opportunities that allow for more equitable access to information. It is exciting to think about hopeful changes in ways communities engage with Microsoft because they can give the company direct feedback.

Question and Answer Session:

After the presentation, ITS America members asked Rylin Rodgers more specific questions about her role at Microsoft.

What are some challenges you experience in your role?

- Rylin stated that a challenge for Microsoft is AI. Rylin explained that AI is a tremendous learning curve, and everybody has different definitions for what the term means and how it should be deployed.

- Rylin emphasized the importance of communicating and collaborating with people at a variety of different places. Microsoft ethical AI centers do not allow for the use of facial recognition for policing or government use because data has shown that it was creating a lot of bias and civil rights violations. At the same time, we do allow facial recognition for accessibility use because some AI tools can allow people who are blind or have low vision to have access to information about the world around them.

How has Microsoft made a concerted effort to not be reactive when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion for various intersectional identities?

- Rylin stated that one effort is the awareness that none of this work on accessibility is just to check a box. When accessibility work is done, individuals get to know that Microsoft for example reflects everyone's values in the workforce.

- Rylin explained that it is about disability hiring because Microsoft is a company that is trying to serve the world which includes people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and people that are of multiple intersections. If Microsoft does not create a culture that allows all talent to be brought out to the decision-making table, then Microsoft is not going to achieve their mission.

Is there any tactile accessibility in physical Microsoft products?

- Rylin shared an example of the Microsoft touchpad that now works for people with limb differences which has made that specific product more accessible.

How can an organization's successful implementation of an accessibility program tie to transportation equity?

An organization's successful implementation of an accessibility program can significantly tie to transportation equity in several ways:

- **Enhanced Mobility for All** - Accessibility programs ensure that transportation services and facilities are designed to be usable by everyone, including individuals with disabilities. This promotes equal access to transportation options, fostering overall equity.

- **Awareness and Education** - An accessibility program can raise awareness about the barriers that individuals with disabilities face in transportation. By educating employees and stakeholders, organizations can promote a culture of inclusivity that values diverse mobility needs.

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- **Design and Infrastructure Improvement** - By focusing on accessibility, organizations can advocate for and support infrastructure improvements that make transportation modes (like buses and rail systems) more accessible, thereby benefiting all users, especially those with disabilities.

- **User-Centric Feedback** - Accessibility programs can create platforms for gathering feedback from employees with disabilities on their transportation experiences. This data can inform changes and improvements that enhance both accessibility and equity in transportation services.

- **Sustainability Initiatives** - Accessibility programs that address transportation often tie into broader sustainability efforts, promoting environmentally friendly transport options that are accessible and equitable for all members of the community.

By integrating accessible programs with transportation equity initiatives, organizations can create a more inclusive and fairer environment for all employees and contribute positively to the larger community. This alignment not only enhances employee satisfaction and well-being but also promotes social justice and equity in transportation access.

Conclusion:

The Equity Community of Practice aims to increase awareness, grow diversity, equity, and inclusion in the transportation ecosystem, and share best practices from ITS America members. This Community of Practice creates a transportation ecosystem that allows participation from all communities. Through these collaborative efforts of fostering a dynamic environment, the goal is to leave every member feeling empowered and valued. During the member presentation, Mindy Gillespie highlighted how Yunex Traffic is bringing inclusivity and diversity into their workplace. This led to a fruitful conversation around shared experiences and potential solutions members think would bring about wholistic and meaningful results.

If you would like to highlight what your organization is doing around diversity, equity, and inclusion, reach out to Tina Williams (twilliams@itsa.org) or Eryn Banton (ebanton@itsa.org) and help us create a safer, greener, smarter transportation ecosystem for all.