

Twenty Years of Accessibility Law:

What the AODA Got Right, Where It Fell Short, and the Gaps that Still Exist in Workplaces

By Faelyne Templer, M.S. Psych, PCC, BCC · May 2026

Between 2007 and 2010, I served as a member of the Accessibility Standards Advisory Council (ASAC) — the body legislated under Ontario’s Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act to advise the Minister on the development of accessibility standards and the progress of standards development committees. I was appointed while leading Avocation Employment Alliance, a nonprofit I founded to provide accessible training to job seekers facing barriers to employment. I was in that advisory room because I believed the AODA could change the working conditions for people who had been systematically excluded from them.

The AODA was passed in 2005 with unanimous, all-party support. Twenty years to create a fully accessible Ontario. Five standards: customer service, information and communications, transportation, the built environment, and employment. It was groundbreaking — Canada’s first comprehensive disability accessibility legislation.

January 1, 2025 was the deadline. Today, in 2026, Ontario is not fully accessible. The fourth independent review of the AODA (which took place in 2023) said so plainly: the province is in an accessibility “crisis.” And I have been sitting with that.

This article is my honest assessment — from the inside — of what the Act got right, where it fell short, and what the opportunity cost of inaccessibility actually looks like when you put a number on it. Because the argument for inclusive workplaces has never been only a human rights argument. It is also a business argument. And it is time more leaders understood that.

What the AODA got right

The AODA got more right than is often acknowledged.

The Act established that accessibility is a legal obligation, not a charitable gesture. It created enforcement mechanisms that did not exist before. It brought people with disabilities into standard-setting processes rather than designing policy about them without them. And it pushed organizations to treat accessibility planning as a governance priority rather than an afterthought.

For people navigating the world in wheelchairs, with mobility devices, or with visual or hearing impairments, real barriers have been reduced. Elevator access in transit. Accessible customer service standards. Multi-year accessibility plans in public institutions. These improvements were hard-won by a disability community that had been advocating for decades. I will not minimize them.

But the AODA's reach has always been uneven. And the further you move from physical or apparent disability, the thinner the progress becomes.

Where it fell short

The AODA was largely designed around physical barriers. Ramps. Curb cuts. Accessible washrooms. These are essential — and still incomplete in too many places across the province.

But legislation built around visible, documented disability left an enormous population almost entirely uncounted: people with non-apparent disabilities. Autistic people, folks with ADHD, autism, dyslexia, chronic illness, learning disabilities, and mental health challenges who come to work every day, encountering barriers to inclusion and participation that no ramp will ever address.

The employment standard — the one that should have been most transformative for this group — is where implementation has been weakest. And the reasons are both cultural and structural.

Most organizations built accommodation processes that are reactive rather than proactive. Triggered by individual disclosure. Requiring extensive documentation. Administered through HR departments that were never resourced to do this work properly. There is rarely a system. There is rarely infrastructure that embeds accessibility into how roles are designed, how performance is measured, or how careers are built. Accessibility remains a bolt-on process rather than a built-in principle.

The consequences are predictable and well-documented. When you have ADHD or are autistic, asking for accommodation means first deciding whether it is safe to disclose. Then navigating a process that was not designed with your experience in mind. Then hoping your manager understands. Then doing it all again every time your role, your team, or your organization changes. The burden of access falls entirely on the person who needs it most.

We built a compliance framework. What we did not build — and what no legislation can fully mandate — is an inclusive culture.

The real cost of inaccessibility

The case for accessibility is often made in the language of rights and values. Both are true and both matter. But there is an equally compelling case to be made in the language that tends to move organizations: dollars.

\$337.7B

Estimated economic benefit of a fully accessible and inclusive Canada

Institute for Work & Health, Tompa et al., 2022 — equal to approximately 17.6% of GDP in the study year

\$50B+

Potential economic boost from narrowing the disability employment gap

TD Economics, 2019 — including approximately 450,000 net new jobs over a decade

**\$55B
CAD**

The ‘Accessible Dollar’ — annual spending power of Canadians with disabilities and their households

Consumer market estimates, widely cited in disability inclusion research

These are not abstract figures. They describe real opportunity costs that inaccessible organizations absorb every day, often without ever seeing them on a balance sheet.

When employees cannot perform at their full potential because their needs go unmet, organizations absorb that cost invisibly — in presenteeism, in higher turnover, in the institutional knowledge that leaves with every person who burns out or gives up disclosing. Research from the Institute for Work & Health found that increases in output and productivity alone from full disability inclusion would represent \$62.2 billion in economic benefits.

The consumer side is equally significant. Disability inclusion leaders in the United States were found to generate 25% more revenue per employee than their peers, according to Accenture’s 2023 research on disability-inclusive companies. The \$55 billion Accessible Dollar represents a customer base that inaccessible organizations are actively turning away — not through malice, but through inattention.

When customers cannot access your goods, services, or digital presence, they do not file a complaint. They leave. And they tell their networks.

The missing fulcrum: inclusive culture

Compliance tells organizations what they must do. Culture determines what they actually do when no one is checking.

In most workplaces, when no one is checking, accessibility is still an afterthought — a reactive accommodation process bolted onto a system that was never designed with the full range of human variation in mind. The AODA created a floor. It did not create a culture. And no legislation can.

The organizations doing accessibility well in 2026 are not that way because a law required it. They got there because their leadership decided that removing barriers to contribution is a strategic priority, not a compliance exercise. They build proactively. They design roles, processes, and physical and digital environments for the full spectrum of how people work — not just for the median employee the system was originally built around.

That shift is possible. It requires intention. And it requires leaders who are willing to ask harder questions than ‘are we compliant?’

Questions every HR leader should be asking right now

These are not audit questions. They are cultural diagnostic questions—the kind that reveal the gap between your accessibility policy and your accessibility practice.

	Diagnostic question
<input type="checkbox"/>	When did you last review your accommodation request process for friction points — not for compliance, but for experience?
<input type="checkbox"/>	What is your organization’s self-identification rate for disability? If it is under 5%, that is not good news. It is a data quality problem.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Do your managers have the training, authority, and time to actually support accommodation requests — or is the process designed for HR to manage on their own?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Is accessibility embedded in how you onboard new employees, or does disclosure happen reactively when something goes wrong?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Does your DEI or accessibility strategy specifically address the needs of neurodivergent communities (autistic people, folks with ADHD and non-apparent disabilities) or does it rely on broad language that leaves those communities invisible?
<input type="checkbox"/>	When was the last time someone with a non-apparent disability reviewed your accommodation process and told you honestly what it feels like to navigate it?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are you designing your physical and digital environments for the full range of how people work, or for the median employee the system was built around?

What I carry from that advisory room

I am proud of what the AODA process set in motion. Landmark legislation. Hard-won progress for people who had been waiting a very long time for the province to take accessibility seriously. A framework that gave advocates, lawyers, and practitioners tools they had not had before.

I am also clear about what remains unfinished — for people with physical disabilities whose basic access is still not guaranteed in 2026, and for the millions of people who live with non-apparent disabilities and remain largely uncounted in the accessibility conversation, navigating processes that were never designed with them in mind.

The AODA’s original limitation was treating accessibility as a destination with a deadline rather than a practice requiring perpetual investment and cultural embedding. There is no day you arrive at accessible. You either keep building or you start sliding backward.

The work that remains is not primarily legislative. It is cultural. It is structural. It requires leaders who are willing to design for the full range of human experience — not just the most convenient version of it.

The organizations that invest in genuine accessibility — not compliance, but culture — are not just doing the right thing. They are building the conditions for everyone they employ to actually do their best work. That is the strategy argument. And it is one of the most important conversations leaders can be having right now.

Sources and further reading

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About the author

Faelyne Templer (she/her) is an ICF and Board-Certified coach, speaker, and facilitator specializing in ADHD, neuro-inclusive leadership, and equitable workplaces. She holds a Master's degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Walden University, with over 25 years of experience in people leadership, HR, DEI governance, and professional development. She is the principal of Path & Purpose Coaching, serves on the Board of Directors of the ADHD Coaches Organization, and is the former Chair of the Board of Directors of the Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada (CADDAC). Between 2007 and 2010 she served as a member of Ontario's Accessibility Standards Advisory Council (ASAC).