

BIG Thoughts™ Research

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Accessible Governance

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Accessible Governance

How modern boards embed accessibility as a standard of governance.

Accessible governance isn't about ramps or captions; it's about designing board systems where every director can contribute at their highest level. It shapes deliberation, oversight, culture, decision-quality, and trust – core drivers of board effectiveness.

When accessibility is an afterthought, even well-meaning boards create invisible barriers. Built-in by design, accessible governance strengthens performance, broadens perspective, and elevates leadership.

1 in 4
adults live with a disability.
80% of those disabilities are invisible.

The question isn't who has a disability; it's whether the governance environment enables everyone to belong and contribute fully. Accessibility must shift from compliance to culture.

Designing for access isn't accommodation, it's leadership.

~ Ivy Lumia, CEO & Founder, Best in Governance

Accessible Governance in Action: Everyday Boardroom Barriers and How to Fix Them



Presentation starts, but captions lag, leaving a director who relies on them with partial information - a tech gap limiting full participation.



Before the meeting, captions are tested and enabled by default so everyone receives information clearly, in real time.



A neurodivergent director arrives prepared, but fast, unstructured discussion buries their insights - a facilitation issue, not an ability issue.



The Chair structures the conversation with clear turns, pauses, and multiple ways for everyone's insights to be heard.



A loud, dim, non-step-free venue is chosen for the board dinner, unintentionally excluding a director and limiting relationship-building.



Events are held in quiet, well-lit, step-free venues, where all directors can participate comfortably and equitably.



The meeting runs long. A director managing chronic pain stays seated, being uncomfortable standing mid-discussion.



The agenda includes regular breaks and movement options, supporting focus, comfort, and health for everyone.

From Compliance to Culture: What Boards Are Missing

For many organizations, accessibility still sits in the policy drawer; a compliance checkbox in a culture where awareness lags.

Disability is a human condition - physical, sensory, cognitive, or mental, that shapes how someone interacts with their environment. **Accessibility** is a governance responsibility: removing physical, digital, procedural, and cultural barriers so everyone can participate fully.

When boards focus on disability, inclusion becomes accommodation. When they centre accessibility, they strengthen oversight, deepen debate, and widen the pool of experienced directors.

From Awareness to Accountability

Every board will, or already does, face an accessibility moment. Yet among Canada Business Corporations Act (CBCA)-governed companies, **persons with disabilities hold only 0.5 – 0.6% of board seats**, a number that reflects underrepresentation, but also whether directors feel safe to disclose.



Non-disclosure is a cultural signal. Silence reflects mistrust or fear that honesty will cost opportunity. Policies may invite openness, but if culture penalizes difference, disclosure becomes risky. True inclusion requires leaders who model action and Boards that cling to stoicism put culture at risk. Boards that model accessibility and lived experience build trust.

The Future Workforce Demands Accessible Governance

Accessibility isn't a perk, it's a baseline:

- Hybrid / remote work are forms of access
- Accessibility is built into workplaces and systems
- Leaders who share openly build trust

Canadians with disabilities make up 27% of the workforce, which will rise as the population ages.



By 2040, nearly 40% of the global workforce will identify as neurodivergent, reflecting differences in how people think, learn, and process information, and reshaping expectations for inclusion and performance.

Why Accessibility Belongs on the Board Agenda

People and culture oversight is no longer optional - accessibility is a core governance priority. Investors, regulators, employees, stakeholders and rights holders expect accessibility diligence equal to that given to strategy, ethics, and risk.

Accessible governance is both foresight and fiduciary responsibility. It strengthens talent pipelines, reduces turnover risk, and builds the psychological safety required for high-performing oversight.

In Canada, this shift is reinforced by the **Accessible Canada Act**, which targets a barrier-free nation by 2040, a timeline boards cannot ignore.

Stephanie Cadieux, Canada's first Chief Accessibility Officer (and first globally) shared insights on how accessibility impacts governance:

Boards set the tone for inclusion. When people with disabilities are at decision-making tables, they reveal what others miss. Prioritizing accessibility in governance turns intent into action.

~ Stephanie Cadieux, Chief Accessibility Officer, Gov't of Canada

Leading the Change: Market Momentum

Leading companies are treating accessibility as a competitive advantage.

TD Economics (2019) estimates that closing Canada's accessibility gap could boost GDP by \$50 billion and create 450,000 new jobs by 2030.



The **Canadian Business Disability Inclusion Network (CBDIN)** exemplifies this shift. Through employer collaboration and shared learning, CBDIN showcases how accessibility drives innovation and performance.

Boards that prioritize accessibility can tap into extraordinary talent that will strengthen culture, widen the company's opportunity, and boost performance. In a market where millions live with disabilities, ignoring this is a competitive risk.

~ Gaurav Upadhyay, Board Chair, CBDIN

What Boards Can Do Now



MEETING DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY

- Use accessible formats and plain language.
- Enable hybrid participation with captions and visual aids.
- Choose platforms with built-in accessibility features.



BOARDROOM ENVIRONMENT

- Conduct an audit of entrances, seating, lighting, and sound
- Ensure travel and accommodations are accessible.
- Add movement and standing breaks to agendas.



COMMUNICATION & CULTURE

- Speak clearly, describe visuals, and avoid jargon.
- Normalize disclosure of accessibility needs.
- Model allyship and safety (Chairs can set the tone).



POLICY & GOVERNANCE

- Embed accessibility in mandates, codes, and policies.
- Review privacy and voluntary disclosure processes.
- Include accessibility in board evaluations.



LEADERSHIP & CAPACITY BUILDING

- Provide accessibility training directors and employees.
- Engage lived-experience experts to co-design solutions
- Broaden recruitment through disability-inclusive networks.

Turning Insight into Action

Accessible governance is the new standard in modern, sustainable governance. When boards design for inclusion, they improve oversight, strengthen culture, and make better decisions.

At Best in Governance (BIG), our award-winning solutions equip boards with evidence-based tools, from Board Evaluations and Governance Risk Assessments to Accountability Frameworks that meet today's realities.

Because the future of governance isn't coming, it's already here. Let's build boards ready for it.

[Get in touch](http://www.bestingovernance.com) to learn more or visit www.bestingovernance.com