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# DCOI gala case study: Making a showcase virtual.

Our challenge was to find quickly an engaging way to share research insights that will help students and graduates with disabilities find meaningful employment.

## *How do you hold a showcase when no one can leave home?*

Over three weeks at the very beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, we turned a physical showcase into a digital stage.

The David C. Onley Initiative (DCOI) was a partnership between Ottawa's four post-secondary education institutions. Led by Carleton University, DCOI ran from July 2018 to April 2020. It advanced awareness of, and created resources for, students and graduates with visible and non-visible disabilities in Ottawa. The ultimate aim was to help these students and graduates find meaningful work and to reduce the employment gap—the gap between the employment rate for people with visible and non-visible disabilities and the employment rate for people without disabilities. This is an important goal for all organizations, and DCOI took a leadership role in meeting Ontario's commitment to full accessibility by 2025.

In late 2019, planning began for an April 2020 event to bring together stakeholders and students to showcase the findings and share the recommendations gathered across the campuses of Carleton, uOttawa, Algonquin College and La Cité.

And then a pandemic turned the world upside-down. Lockdown ensued. Uncertainty became the new normal.

## *Protecting the goal*

As COVID-19 grew into a life-altering obstacle in March, the possibility of holding an in-person event quickly evaporated. But the outcomes of a program with the potential to impact many lives, businesses and institutions for the better are important and valuable. This information deserved to be shared.

The guest list was over 100. Attendees were looking forward to better understanding how to accommodate people with

disabilities and utilize an untapped pool of talent critical to battling an ongoing workforce shortage. The goal of the showcase was to highlight for stakeholders—including leaders at the four major educational institutions—that their efforts were worth the time and resources spent.

Everyone involved on all sides wanted to maintain the scope of the event and create as much of a “live” experience as possible. Also of paramount importance: the showcase must respect safety concerns and reflect the initiative’s core principle of accessibility.

The solution? Move everything online.

*“It was such an unusual time. We knew we wanted a way to share the achievements so many worked so hard for, but we had no idea what was even possible from COVID-19 quarantine.”*

— Julie Caldwell

### *Rapid shift to virtual*

We had just over three weeks from the cancellation of the physical event to the date of the online gala. And everyone was wrestling with the fear and uncertainty of COVID-19.

DCOI staff and volunteers were not the type to let a little adversity get in the way, though. Everyone was committed to creating a solution that was engaging, informative and interactive—not a passive presentation or “just a Zoom call.”

Onleyinitiative.ca offered an accessible information hub that stakeholders knew and used. Now the site would do double duty as a reception venue.

We began converting every resource and element of the gala to stream live online. We reached out to every attendee. While the in-person event

## DCOI virtual celebration showcase stats:



### Live virtual celebration

109 total attendees for the virtual event

90+ attendees remained online for the whole event

The Honourable David C. Onley tuned in and spoke live to attendees

50 attendees remained past the 4pm ending to participate in a Q&A



### Celebration Showcase webpage

500+ visits to the Celebration Showcase webpage the week after launch

6 selfie videos were produced and shared

12 posters were converted to accessible PDFs in both official languages



### What's next

A full report on DCOI's outcomes and accomplishments is launching in Fall 2020

was off, the celebration was very much on. “Don’t make other plans,” the attendees were told.

## *Accessibility above all*

Reflecting DCOI’s primary mandate, accessible design was of utmost importance to ensure all users could experience the showcase to their fullest potential. For the virtual celebration, we designed a completely accessible webpage that featured easy navigation, compelling graphics and a comprehensive look back at outcomes and findings from DCOI’s two-year run. The entire showcase—as with all work created for DCOI—was designed to meet all Accessibility for Ontarians Disability Act standards. Adaptations included appropriate content hierarchy to ensure all systems would be able to display the content in the correct order; acceptable font sizing and colour contrast ratios for persons with vision loss; and closed captions for playback on all dynamic content, such as videos and presentations.

We converted every piece of media planned for the in-person event into screen-reader accessible PDFs—including stand-up displays, photo reels, PowerPoint presentations and others—and populated the site with them. We also coded a special functionality to create a poster showcase on the webpage.

And to shine a light on all of the planned presenters, we designed and directed the filming of a series of selfie videos in which DCOI members and select partners highlighted their favourite aspects of the initiative.

We did all of this while respecting COVID-19 quarantine restrictions: liaising remotely with all members of the teams; collecting videos; and editing, packaging and transcribing the materials to provide closed captioning.

## *Inform and engage*

The revamped showcase was inspired by the tireless work DCOI put into every aspect of the initiative over the course of two years. The retrospective’s innovative and nimble approach brought attendees together to learn about and reflect on everything that was accomplished—even from a distance. In fact, some of the remote meeting’s features enhanced the abilities of some attendees to enjoy the event. We were working with a target audience that included students and recent graduates with disabilities. The virtual event enabled them to attend from the comfort and convenience of their own homes, using their own technology.

DCOI’s expertise in accessibility and Stiff’s capabilities in strategy, design and production combined to produce an event that recognized and celebrated two years of hard work and met vital accessibility standards. All in under three pandemic weeks.

*“Stiff pushed us to not compromise on the scope of our ideal event. They worked seven-days-a-week to make sure it was a success.”*

– Julie Caldwell

Stiff

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