

Tony Labillois looks back on 35 years of accessibility

by Bridget Duquette, Writer-Editor, and Jean-Sébastien Barbeau, Special contribution



Tony Labillois, one of StatCan’s Champions for Persons with Disabilities.

This year, National AccessAbility Week (NAAW) runs from May 26 to June 1. NAAW was created to “celebrate the contributions of persons with disabilities and promote accessibility and inclusion in communities and workplaces across the country.”

With this in mind, we spoke to someone who has embodied these values throughout his entire career at Statistics Canada. **Tony Labillois**, Director General of the Justice, Diversity and Population Statistics Branch and one of StatCan’s Champions for Persons with Disabilities, has been with the agency for 35 years. Now, upon his retirement, he is looking back on his experience with accessibility and accommodations at the agency—and is sharing his hopes for the future of accessibility in the public service.

Coming to StatCan

In 1988, when Tony was a student at *Université Laval*, he saw a recruitment notice from Statistics Canada—they were looking for methodologists. Although Tony wasn’t particularly interested in moving to Ottawa to work at the agency, curiosity won out and he decided to give the entrance exam a shot.

As he was born with low vision, Tony requested accommodations to write the exam. However, on the day of the test, he found that the examiner had not prepared any accommodations. Tony was unfazed—at this point, he had made it through his entire school career without any assistance—so he said he would take the test anyway. But the examiner was adamant that Tony should receive the accommodations he had requested and insisted that the test be postponed.

Tony at the United Nations Human Rights Council

In November 2023, Tony participated in the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review for Canada at the United Nations (UN) in Switzerland, on behalf of Statistics Canada.

Last September, Tony received an invitation from Canadian Heritage to join the Canadian delegation, which appears before the other UN member states every four and a half years for a review of its human rights record. He took the opportunity to emphasize the importance of data disaggregation in understanding human rights. “I reassured the participating federal departments and provinces that StatCan would provide everything it could to help them and that I myself would do my part,” he said.

The review was a new experience for StatCan and time was of the essence. The products had to be delivered quickly and the session ran like clockwork. “The process of appearing before the working group is uncommon and none of the delegation members had seen anything like it,” said Tony. Canada was granted only 70 minutes of the 3.5-hour review for comments, and StatCan was unsure whether it would be given the opportunity to speak given the issues raised by the member states. The final adjustments were made the day before the review in Geneva. “In the scenario at the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN, I presented at the end. When I gave my presentation, the entire delegation was excited and insisted on making time for me,” he added.

On the day of the review at the *Palais des Nations*, while listening to the representatives from other countries, Tony practiced his speech in his head in an effort to make a bigger impact. Then, his turn came. “I was a bit nervous. I proudly spoke of everyone who believes in the importance of facts and who aspires to improve human rights,” said Tony. You can listen to his presentation on the UN website at [Canada Review – 44th Session Universal Periodic Review](#), beginning at 3:13:59.

Tony remembers the emotion he felt as he explained the importance of disaggregated data as a person with a disability. “I spoke with deep gratitude, thinking of the human rights experiences of so many others, of my own life experience, and of the incredible chance I have to live in a society, economy and work environment where I can take my rightful place—to the point that I was invited, supported and included in an event taking place before a global assembly.”

So, a few weeks later, Tony wrote the test in a well-lit office in Quebec City with the accommodations he required to succeed. Tony was deeply moved—he could not believe they had made these changes in consideration of his needs.

“This was simply not the norm in 1988,” he notes. “I was used to using a small telescope to see the blackboard in school and sometimes asking for notes from classmates in university.”

Tony ended up receiving a job offer from Statistics Canada in 1989 and making the move to Ottawa, which meant leaving behind his friends and family. But he was touched by the warm welcome he received. Although there were accessibility issues at the time, he felt a sense of community at the agency right away.

“My first chief told me, ‘If you need any special equipment, we will buy it for you.’ She said I had been hired for my competencies and they would do whatever was needed to meet my needs and to ensure that I could fully contribute to the results of the team,” Tony says. “They ordered a powerful swing arm for my computer monitor so I could pull the screen close to my face, and, eventually, I was also one of the first to get a personal computer in my office.”

“My team was composed of people from all around Canada and all around the world, and they all welcomed me,” he adds. “This, more than anything, is why I stayed at Statistics Canada.”

One day, Tony went to his office mailbox and found the minutes of the latest meeting of the Persons with Disabilities Committee. He was excited to know StatCan had such a committee and was touched that someone had thought to send him the minutes—in both French and English. This was one of many moments when Tony knew he had come to work for the right agency.

Working with accessibility and inclusion

In the early 1990s, Tony began working as a supervisor in Business Survey Methods Division. He soon discovered that everyone learns differently and works differently, so

he strove to create an environment where his employees' strengths would be highlighted. In 1994, he was appointed Senior Methodologist in Household Survey Methods Division and was put in charge of a staff of seven. It was in this role that he first met employees with mental health challenges and began to learn how to help and support them while continuing to achieve significant results for the agency (for example through the Canadian Cancer Registry, Hospital Patient-Oriented Database, health analysis, etc.).

Tony continued to reach new heights in his StatCan career. In 1997, he was made a Chief of Special Business Surveys and was responsible for developing and delivering more than 20 cost-recovery business surveys, some of which still exist today. In 2000, he became Assistant Director responsible for the implementation of electronic data collection infrastructure, processes and tools in StatCan's survey operations.

Then, in 2002, in addition to his primary responsibilities, he became Statistics Canada's Champion for Persons with Disabilities. Tony worked actively with employees to develop ambitious and realistic action plans and to promote new ideas and tangible solutions, expressing the concerns and priorities of the community within the agency, the public service and beyond to implement sustainable solutions for more equity, accessibility and inclusion. During these years, [Tony was also championing individuals](#) with invisible, temporary or episodic disabilities.

"These people may only need support sometimes, or for a limited period of time, but they still need support," Tony says. "For example, I was on a committee to remove perfumes and toxic cleaning chemicals from the workplace—this is one example of an invisible need that needs to be respected."

When Tony became Assistant Director, there were more than 130 people in his division. He initially didn't talk about his eyesight. However, because he was not able to see well enough to recognize his employees, he didn't feel he was as approachable or as comfortable as he needed to be. In 2004, when he was rotated to Public Institutions Division, he explained immediately to his new employees that he has low vision, and that people should feel comfortable coming up to him and introducing themselves so he could get to know them. He also let them know that they could feel free to ask any questions about his low vision, as they would now collaborate together.

"The reaction was immediate," he recalls. "I soon had people at my office door—a mother whose child had low vision, a colleague who wanted to know how to work with me better, another colleague who was slowly losing his eyesight. I made a connection with people very soon. I felt accepted and included more quickly and the more we are accepted, the more we accept ourselves."

The future of accessibility

Tony may be retiring, but he will keep his position as the Vice-Chair of the Governing Council and the Chair of the Advisory Council of the Canadian Accessibility Network, which now includes more than 120 collaborating organizations (StatCan among them) and more than 250 professionals across Canada. He also hopes to continue to provide leadership on other significant initiatives related to accessibility, equity and inclusion.



Tony Labillois speaking at the Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations.

He is excited about the laws on accessibility, including the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act](#), which is working toward making Ontario more accessible and inclusive by 2025, and the [Accessible Canada Act](#), which aims to create a Canada without barriers by 2040.

“We need to measure our accessibility progress,” he says. “If we don’t measure something it does not exist, but if we measure it, we can track it, discuss it and improve it with tangible actions for meaningful results.”

Tony has made his mark on Statistics Canada over the course of his long career. And, while he once saw his low vision as a challenge to overcome, he is now recognizing that it brought him strength.

“Being born with low vision forged my character,” he says. “It made me who I am.”

Thank you, Tony, for all your hard work on accessibility and inclusion at Statistics Canada. You have made a lasting impression and you will be very missed!



Bridget Duquette, Writer–Editor.

She can be reached at bridget.duquette@statcan.gc.ca.



Jean-Sébastien Barbeau, Special contribution.

He can be reached at jean-sebastien.barbeau@statcan.gc.ca.