

The Missing Link: Why Accessible Workplace Technology Matters

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It's hard to think of a workplace that doesn't rely on information technology (IT). From websites and email to mobile devices and enterprise software, IT is everywhere in nearly every industry, helping us streamline operations, maximize productivity, and work smarter.

But when technology doesn't work for everyone, including people with disabilities, the story changes. Technology goes from being a "great equalizer" to a tool of exclusion, creating barriers to employment and preventing the career advancement of certain individuals. Just imagine what it would be like if you couldn't access your email, phone, or basic workplace tools. Could you do your job effectively? For many people with disabilities — including those who acquire disabilities through age, illness, or injury — this scenario is a reality. And inaccessible workplace technology is the root cause.

For many employers, the concept of accessible IT is new territory. They might understand the importance of a physically accessible workplace, but they may not fully grasp what inclusion

and accessibility mean in relation to the virtual workplace. And such inexperience can lead to significant problems, from legal issues to decreased workforce productivity.

Adding to the problem is the issue of inaccessible online job applications and other digital recruiting tools, which prevent many people with disabilities from applying for jobs in the first place. According to a survey of people with disabilities¹ conducted by the Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology (PEAT), 46% of respondents rated their last experience applying for a job online as "difficult to impossible."

That's obviously a problem because if a company's online job advertisements, applications, screening tools, and digital interviewing applications are not accessible to those with disabilities, certain individuals are effectively excluded from applying for jobs at the company. This can expose employers to legal risk, and it defeats the efforts of federal contractors to meet their affirmative action obligations under Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act. Most importantly, it limits the pool of talent employers will be able to consider for open positions.

A Changing Mindset

Why is inaccessible IT so pervasive in today's workplaces? Traditionally, it

boils down to lack of awareness because accessibility issues are generally not intentional on the part of employers or technology providers. In many cases, businesses purchase off-the-shelf IT applications created by third-party vendors, which may or may not be fully accessible. Unless someone brings an accessibility issue to their attention, they aren't likely to know about any usability shortcomings.

Accessibility awareness is increasing these days due in part to the changing regulatory environment. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has established that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) extends to Internet website access, mobile applications, and other forms of information and communications technology. And as of May 2016, the DOJ had entered into 171 settlement agreements² related to technology accessibility. While these settlements only apply to the parties involved, they offer insights into potential actions the DOJ might exact in similar situations in the future. Not surprisingly, they are spurring employers and other ADA-covered entities to think proactively when it comes to accessible technology.

The main driver of this shift, however, is a growing awareness of the myriad of benefits that universally designed products offer. It simply makes good sense to buy products that

are designed for as many people as possible. Wise employers know that giving their current and prospective workers equal access to today's productivity tools is a smart business practice that positively affects the bottom line. And this is, in part, because technologies designed with the needs of people with disabilities in mind often end up being broadly useful to everyone. Closed captioning, text messaging, and voice recognition are just a few examples of technologies that began as accommodations and became productivity enhancers for all of us.

Accessibility Pitfalls

If you're new to the subject, you might be asking yourself what it means for a website or IT application to be inaccessible. Often, it relates to incompatibility with assistive technology (AT), such as the screen readers used by many people with visual impairments. But accessibility also extends to people with cognitive issues, dexterity challenges, and other types of disabilities. Examples of common accessibility shortcomings include complex web navigation that is not intuitive; timeout restrictions that cause an application to close before the user can save or complete it; lack of video captioning, which impacts those who are deaf or hard of hearing; lack of alternative text, which can make images hard to recognize; poor screen/color contrast; inaccessible form fields; and mouse-only input options, which affect those who are unable to operate a computer mouse. The good news is that preventing or fixing these issues generally helps all users, not just those with disabilities.

How to Take Action on Accessibility

So what exactly are an employer's responsibilities when it comes to accessible technology? Essentially, they



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involve making the workplace technology you buy and use accessible to all job applicants and employees, including those who have disabilities. This means:

- Ensuring that all employees can access the technology currently in place — from computers, to online job applications, to company-issued smartphones.
- Creating websites that meet or exceed accepted accessibility standards (e.g., Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act³ and/or the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0).⁴
- Committing to purchasing only accessible technology products when procuring new technology for your workplace.
- If you manufacture technology, you develop accessible, interoperable, and universally designed products for your customers.

While these may sound daunting to some, accessibility efforts are often easier than you might expect, even for the untrained. Plus, a range of free tools and resources can help you learn about and take action on accessible technology in the workplace. Many are offered by the U.S. Department of Labor's

Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and its technical assistance centers, including PEAT and the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN). Examples include:

- TechCheck. This PEAT tool helps organizations assess their accessible technology practices. Whether you have a formal accessible technology effort or not, TechCheck (www.peatworks.org/techcheck) gives you a benchmarking "snapshot" of the current state of your technology, the accessibility goals you want to reach, and steps you could take to achieve them.
- TalentWorks. This PEAT tool (www.peatworks.org/talentworks) helps employers and human resources professionals ensure their online job applications and other recruiting technologies are accessible to job seekers with disabilities.
- Buy IT! – Your Guide for Purchasing Accessible Technology. Implementing accessible workplace technology means buying it in the first place. This PEAT tool (www.peatworks.org/Buy-IT) helps employers and their purchasing staff build accessibility and usability into their

IT procurement processes.

- Accessible Technology Action Steps: A Guide for Employers. PEAT's eight-step roadmap (www.peatworks.org/action-steps) is an excellent place to start your accessible technology journey. It begins with the basics and leads you through the stages of assessing the accessibility of your existing technology products, building an accessibility plan/initiative, measuring your program's effectiveness, and more.

- AskEARN: Creating an Accessible and Welcoming Workplace. EARN (www.askearn.org/topics/creating-an-accessible-and-welcoming-workplace/) offers background and a range of resources to help employers ensure their doors are open — literally and virtually — to all qualified individuals, including people with disabilities.

Conclusion

In the end, it's important to recognize that workplace technology is a critical component of nearly all workplaces today. It's essential that all employees, including those with disabilities, be able to access these technologies to optimize their performance and deliver for their employers. By thinking and acting accessibly, everybody wins.

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