From DEI to DEIA: Why Adding Accessibility Is So Important

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Traveling for work as a disabled person is very difficult. I require a wheelchair to navigate the airport, and traveling alone with one is exhausting. One of the hardest parts is finding an accessible taxi to take me to my hotel. Even if I book in advance, there is always a good chance they will either not show up, or send me one that isn't wheelchair accessible. When I arrive at the hotel, my accessible room has a door that is so heavy it is incredibly difficult for me to open. The convention center has escalators everywhere, but the elevators are hidden in the back and I have to take two separate elevators to get to the specific floor where I need to be. The staff at the conference are unsure how to direct me from one side to the other without using an escalator. Course room doors are closed and I have to wait for someone to come by to open them for me (because there are no automatic door openers). Meeting rooms are so full of tables and chairs that I either have to stay right by the door in the back of the room or have people move a bunch of chairs and draw even more attention to myself. By the end of the conference, I am in immense pain, exhausted, and wishing I never came. It usually takes my body at least a week to recover. This is just an example of one of my latest work conferences.

This experience is by no means unique to me. Many people with similar accessibility issues face these hurdles and more on a daily basis in their workplaces, schools, communities, and even homes. Often, these problems are caused by either lack of knowledge or a lack of foresight on the part of organizers. Virtual meeting options have been an amazing alternative, but they don't always provide the same experience as in-person meetings.

Definition of Accessibility

So, what is accessibility? It is defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as "the design of products, devices, services, vehicles, or environments so as to be usable by people with disabilities. Accessibility can be viewed as

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the 'ability to access' and benefit from some system or entity.[1] The concept focuses on enabling access for people with disabilities, or enabling access through the use of assistive technology; however, research and development in accessibility brings benefits to everyone."[1] This is a broad definition that doesn't get to the heart of the importance of accessibility. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 61 million adults in the United States and more than 1 billion worldwide live with some type of disability.[2] Accessibility in publishing goes beyond the workplace. Making sure that everyone can access content, attend functions, and otherwise participate in publishing ensures they have an equal chance at opportunities.

The Executive Order on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce was signed by President Joe Biden on June 25, 2021. The goal of this order is to have the federal government become fully accessible and be a model employer of people with disabilities. This has brought more attention to the larger issue of what accessibility means in the workplace and beyond.

Types of Accessibility

Just like there are many different types of disability, there are also many different types of accessibility. A person with a physical disability may need building accessibility (e.g., ramps, parking, electronic door openers). A person with vision issues may need a screen reader for websites or alternative text for images. A person with a hearing impairment may need transcripts for meetings or webinars. Special computer equipment may be needed to accommodate various types of disabilities. These are some examples of more well-known accessibility issues. However, not all disabilities are easy to see. These are generally called "invisible disabilities" or "invisible illnesses."[4] It can be difficult to seek accessible options when you have an invisible disability, and not everyone feels they are able to speak up for themselves. It isn't always possible to know who needs accessible accommodation and who does not. This can lead to individuals feeling frustrated and left out, and is another reason why proactively striving for accessibility is so important.

Ways to Address Accessibility

Everyone deserves to be able to use websites to get information and disseminate our knowledge. To ensure

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that everyone has equal access to online content, website reviews should be done to make sure organizations are doing everything possible to follow current guidelines on accessibility. Tools such as alt text on images and making sure headers follow the correct order help to make sure websites are easily read by screen readers for people with visual impairments. Videos should always use closed captioning for people with hearing impairments and auditory processing problems. Making sure websites can be navigated easily by keyboard helps people with mobility disorders. It might not be possible to do all of these things at once but at the very least, keeping accessibility in mind when posting new content to a website will help to ensure that the information is reaching everyone.

Meeting organizers should also take accessibility into account, starting with some easy ways to help people with disabilities have a more positive experience at in-person meetings. A great start is to ask attendees up-front at registration what accommodations they may need—and this goes beyond dietary restrictions (though that is important as well!). Options like reserved front-row seating, advance copies of the presentation slides, and offering an "other" field in which attendees can list potentially unanticipated needs are just as important. Additionally, the meeting space should be planned out for wheelchairs—including all meeting rooms—and there should be available spots other than those at the very back of a room. Where are the elevators located, and how would a person with a disability get from the elevator to the meeting rooms and back? Are the tables and food within reach of someone in a wheelchair? Have a conference organizer try to navigate the space in a wheelchair and point out the difficulties they encounter. Some lesser-known considerations might include always having snacks available for people with blood sugar issues, accommodating for service animals and their needs, and making sure closed captions are always used, even at live events. Consider hiring a sign language interpreter for live events, and designating a seating area in front of them for people who need sign language interpretation.

The workplace is one of the more important places to consider. Having flexible scheduling allows people to work around appointments or transportation needs, especially if they rely on specialty transportation. The ability to work from home has allowed more options for people who have previously had a difficult time finding work. Neurodiverse employees tend to work better in certain environments that are generally easy to accommodate, such as quieter workspaces or workspaces in which the use of headphones is allowed.

Adding in "Accessibility"

The Council of Science Editors (CSE) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee was recently formed to support CSE in establishing an organizational infrastructure, culture, and capacity among its leadership, members, and the profession at large to deliver programmatic activities and training to integrate DEI best practices in science editing, publication management, scholarly publishing and communication, member recruitment, participation, and engagement. We want to become a resource for members of the publishing community when it comes to DEI issues and have made a great start during our first year.[4] As we continue our work, we want to make sure accessibility is not overlooked and promote ways in which it can become more than just an afterthought. With a large number of people identifying as having a disability, relying on laws to handle equity and inclusion is not enough (as we have seen with other diversity issues). Invisible disabilities are particularly at risk of not being accommodated.

In order to highlight the importance of accessibility, we are happy to report that the DEI committee will henceforth be known as the "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility" (DEIA) committee, and will be including accessibility related measures in our activities.

Conclusion

There has been a tremendous process in terms of increasing attention to aspects of accessibility, yet there is room for great focus and improvement. By highlighting accessibility measures, we not only ensure access for everyone, but we are also providing an environment that fosters collaboration and helps to bring unique perspectives. Including accessibility in DEI activities is important to the people who need it, but also to everyone in the community.

Acknowledgment

References and Links

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