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## **ACCESSIBILITY – TODAY AND TOMORROW**

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### **Abstract**

In "Where Are WE?" the author reflects on the state of accessibility, drawing from a career marked by pioneering achievements—like the first accessible mobile phones and set-top boxes—enabled by mainstream technology platforms from Microsoft, Apple, and Google. Despite these advancements, systemic barriers persist: over 96% of web homepages remain inaccessible, and people with disabilities face higher unemployment, lower educational attainment, and social exclusion in 2025. The article critiques the unintended consequences of accessibility specialisms, poor representation, and the commercialization of representative organizations, which often prioritize survival over service delivery. It calls for a shift toward human-centred design, consistent vision, and sustained cultural change, advocating for disability-led leadership, simplified messaging, and collaborative strategies to foster true inclusion across all sectors.

### **Keywords:**

*Accessibility, Human-centered Design, Disability Inclusion, Systemic Barriers, Representation, Co-Production*

## **ACCESSIBILITY – TODAY AND TOMORROW**

### **Where Are WE?**

**At the time of writing, my observations are many and varied – ranging from extremely positive to questioning the reality of my, and that of friends and colleagues, successes.**

**On the one hand, mainstream technology platforms have delivered great solutions in enabling access – Microsoft, Apple, Google – and improvement and major opportunities are there for the taking. I have led and worked with others to deliver some amazing outcomes – many “firsts”! The first accessible mobile phones, the first accessible set top boxes, the digitisation and updating of talking books and the delivery of daisy and related products, engagement with the web consortium at its inception; and relatively small but to me significant products or developments – the first broadcast quality accessible recording devices in the mainstream, producing alternative options for Braille display manufacturing and attached cost reduction, delivering legislation and learning from others to localise approaches that meant payment systems, shopping websites, and much more, were available to people with disabilities. There have been amazing outcomes, opportunities, people with whom I’ve worked, teams who were willing to engage, commercial entities that changed the way they operated and recognised that people with disabilities were, in fact, customers, employees, service users ....**

**And yet there are some terrifying realities around disability and lack of access, lack of understanding, lack of real shifts in culture.**

**Reports clearly show that people with disabilities are:**

- *More likely to be out of work;*
- *Less likely to reach equitable educational standards;*
- *Less accepted as valuable citizens;*
- *More likely to be lonely, poorer, and misunderstood.*

Despite the technological opportunities, well over 96% of home pages on the web are inaccessible, it is a struggle to buy accessible white goods, Software (even vital software such as virus checkers) are likely to be inaccessible, core information is more rather than less likely to be available accessibly, and major areas of life even in the richest nations in 2025 are far from inclusive.

Why is that ? What is it that is preventing us from delivering meaningful human experiences to people that are “different”, “not the average”? Why are we still talking about inclusion, accessibility, and “co-production” rather than talking about customers, humans, and service?

There is too little space and time to do justice to the topic. But below, I have attempted to outline areas that I have learned, across my career, that need attention or addressing differently. Perhaps think of this article as an opener for discussion, a trigger to reflect, a challenge to act.

## **Challenges**

### **Special Knowledge For Special People**

With the best intentions, it appears that we have invented specialisms around accessibility – design thinking and concepts such as Universal Design, accreditation for specialist knowledge to deal with special people, verbiage and documentation that has special language – is that what we wanted? Didn’t we want to be treated inclusively as

people, such that good design meant design for human beings in all of their shapes and sizes? I am a contributor to special language and definitions for special people so that we could talk about it to engineers and others – but maybe we need to move to the next chapter.

## **Representation**

With very notable exceptions (and there are exceptions to every rule), representation of people with disabilities is still pitiful – in the workplace, in daily life, in advertising, in art – and if there is representation, it is often viewed as exceptional or something to draw attention to. So many initiatives, so much money, so much effort – yet the public view of people with disabilities generally is fraught with misunderstanding, fear, confusion and at the most extreme, hate. We have developed ways of engaging the wider community through legislation, through models of disability that try to replace “old thinking” with newer thinking such as the social model and derivatives of disability – itself becoming a bit of a problem given the complex relationship between people, technology, medicine, the environment, massive and accelerating change ...

## **Representative Organisations – What Are They About?**

During my career over a 25-30 year period, I have seen a major change in voluntary sector and representative organisations – Again, there are exceptions. But my general findings and supporting data can be summarised as:

- *It seemed like a smart move to think more commercially, adopt commercial mindsets, and become more “efficient” – let’s learn from the business community;*

- *A gradual focus shift resulted that meant that the measures of success, cost/benefits, outcomes, and expectations began to feel commercial;*
- *What gets measured gets done, of course – and targets of the kind that drive commercial growth gradually became the order of the day;*
- *And finally we have large representative organisations that focus on "reach", "fundraising targets", "brand awareness", "social change", marketing – and increasingly a focus on "social change" along with an intellectualisation of disability rather than delivery of services that support real people; missing in action it seems to me are a broad swathe of people with disabilities who should and could be the leaders of today and tomorrow.*

The result? Do we need braille for blind people becomes a legitimate question, especially when pitted against the costs of delivery, the small numbers Braille serves, and a confusion around the origins, need and data that supports Braille – I use this as an example because it is home territory as a blind person but you could insert more or less any other product or service.

Additionally, the idea of co-production is often interpreted as "asking people with disabilities for the solution to a problem"; sometimes this can be useful, but mostly I see it as an abdication of responsibility – people with disabilities, as most people who try to resolve challenges, are amazingly inventive so the chances are that asking groups for a solution will result in multiple and conflicting information – establishing what the need is enables interpretation.

## **Representative Organisations – Who Are They Talking To and Why?**

**For the reasons above, along with “clarity of focus” and similar oft-recited phrases, Larger organisations are focusing more on survival than ever before – money is harder to come by, and Governments and statutory providers are cutting back, which leads to seeking financial support and stability, primarily for the organisation.**

**Add to that the need to focus on home territory, collaboration, and longer term strategies across the sector become difficult or impossible to deliver – brand, survival, “ownership”, become more important than agreeing to fix, jointly, the more universal challenges.**

**And more often than not, people with disabilities are unlikely to hold leadership positions in the representative organisations, the wider community are minimally consulted, and the default view begins to emerge that somehow there is a distinction between being and “employer” and a “representing organisation” – IE, employing people with disabilities is something to be considered outside of the organisational remit.**

**Astonishingly, and in an exemplary fashion, some commercial companies consistently recruit higher numbers of people with disabilities compared to the organisations that purport to represent them.**

## **Sustaining Change**

**Strategies, people, policy positions, and envisioning the future – these come and go, and they are as easily brushed away as a new management team. Yet all the evidence points to real, longer-term change needs consistency, engagement, and deep fixes that mean**

**wholesale changes of hearts and minds – the strategy might change, the people and the environment might change, but the vision that remains consistent is the vision that will win through.**

## **Diversity – And All That!**

**The disability agenda and the needs of people with disabilities are complex – there is no getting away from that! There are lots of us with lots of disabilities of various kinds and flavours who all need some of the same, but some different, solutions. The general public is confused – and we are confusing. But throw into that some broader terminology that includes words like Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, Belonging – and somewhere in that mix is an assumption that disability may be an element.**

**Instead of cutting through with our messaging, engaging in solutions, and proactively seeking to simplify messaging, we have either complicated things or are even less visible than previously.**

## **What works?**

**Again, I could give numerous examples to back up the below, and perhaps this article leads to a series to address each point – but I and colleagues close to me I think would broadly agree on the following things we have learned :**

- Consistent and Persistent Vision: don't back off the big ticket items until you have dealt with them;**
- Engagement Strategy: engage with businesses, regulators, Governments ... but meet them where they are; talk the language they understand and take them on a journey, along the way proving your case through tangible exemplars that are meaningful to the audience;**



- **Social Change Is Ok ... But Don't Shout About It Without Living It: Credibility is everything – if you want to talk about education, you wouldn't have a primary witness who works in travel. In the same way, not having a provable and deep understanding of what it is to deliver services accessibly or knowledge of how to create mainstream products that are accessible if that is the intent, credibility is only possible if there is shared understanding.**
- **People With Disabilities and Engagement: critical for obvious reasons.**
- **Create Sustainability but Deliver Solutions that for now are not Commercial: almost opposite in some cases to what is taking place – When mr Joe Public puts his hand in his pocket to donate to a good cause, he believes you are using his money to deliver great stuff for people with disabilities – live that message.**

## **The Next Chapter**

**Here are specifics I believe we ought to bring about as a community/movement of people with disabilities and those who represent us.**

## **Reconsider Messaging**

**Engage with the public at its point in the journey of understanding – along with corporates and others. Human-centred – doesn't that capture people and their needs? Understanding your customer – with Personas that you can test against? Maybe that's easier as an opener compared to disability focus.**

**First Class Customer Service is often Approaching Accessibility. What we pay for as first class is often akin to an accessible experience –**

and with a bit more thought, rather than 85% delivered, it can be 100%.

### **Coonveener/Broker/Shared Strategy.**

Bring organisations together as a convenor to harness the capability to deliver wholesale change. Since organisations cannot or will not do it themselves, create a vehicle that is easy to engage with. Working with The Billion Strong, a grouping originally set up by RuhGlobal, we want to bring that ambition to life.

### **Long-term Cultural Change.**

Build modules for schools, colleges, and universities that talk about understanding difference – with core messaging around disability but a focus on whichever mainstream subject students are engaged with. If you are teaching accountancy, deliver the core module, but angle the solutions such that it is relevant to future accountants – as employers, as producers of information and reports, as people in their community.

### **Sustained Change Agenda to Champion Leaders in Disability Advocacy and Organisations.**

We have to move to a place where organisations that speak and act on behalf of people with disabilities are led by, overtly informed by, and audited by people with disabilities. It is a crazy world! We all know this. Particularly when it's outrageous to suggest that an agency supporting lesbian women should be led by a straight man – it is still perfectly obvious that leadership in the disability community is delivered through non-disabled people.

There is a clear understanding and certainly default behaviour that can be characterised in the organisations that represent people with

**disabilities as: you can be professional, or you can be disabled – but you can't be both.**

## **Models Describing Disability**

**The social model is a lens through which we can view disability, and it is an aid to understanding the dynamics at play. It has been particularly useful in moving away from the idea that people with disabilities needed to be repaired or fixed. However, the world we live in today is not that of 40 or 50 years ago – technological advances, AI, genetics, stem cell work, neurological understanding, and much more, begin to blur what used to be a relatively clear distinction both in attitude/behaviour and treatment. In addition, my observation is that it has become a box-tick – organisations of many hues will trip off the phrase “we support the social model of disability” in the same way that they will trip off the ever-increasing list of elements of human life that they treat equitably.**

## **Why now? Why Bother Changing Things?**

**The data tells you all you need to know. A report I read last year starts with the immortal phrase: the employment rate in the disability community, along with the educational attainment levels achieved, have not changed in six decades! The evidence from multiple sources is there to see – and sadly, had it not been for the technical revolution that has and is taking place, employment figures and educational attainment would be even worse.**

**Thinking more laterally about employment and job prospects, the mantra we agreed on and have argued for many years has been that inclusive education is the best and only way and offers the obvious inclusive solution; the same goes for employment – close down**

**sheltered workshops or specialist working environments for people with disabilities.**

**But we didn't consider alternatives – supporting co-operatives, enabling people to set up small businesses or mutually beneficial networks that produce goods and services.**

**There is perhaps another, much wider, political consideration. It seems to me that, certainly in the western world, and much of the rest of it, the measure of success is to do with material wealth – the success of a company is measured by how much it grows and continues to grow, how much it produces and sells, how much investment it receives ... and the gap between rich and poor increases daily. In line with our dehumanisation in the workplace, with our tendency to talk about people as resources, our Governments focusing on industrial growth with nothing ruled out (weaponry, planetary resources, etc), perhaps there is a new dawn – one which centres us on humanity and human-centredness with all that this means in the broader sense. What is it all about if it isn't about life? Relationships? Our environment that supports us? Recognising difference and embracing it – bringing about new ways of enabling contribution – isn't that something closer to political positioning and a new chapter, new descriptors, for the disability landscape?**

## **Conclusion**

**The journey toward true accessibility reveals a paradox: while technological advancements have opened doors for people with disabilities, systemic barriers and cultural inertia continue to exclude them from equitable participation in society. My career highlights the power of innovation—from accessible mobile phones to inclusive legislation—but also underscores the stark reality that over 96% of**

**web homepages remain inaccessible, and people with disabilities are still marginalized in employment, education, and social life. Moving forward, we must reject specialized silos and embrace human-centered design as a universal standard, ensuring that solutions serve all people, not just the “average.” This requires consistent vision, disability-led leadership, and simplified messaging that engages the public and corporations alike. By fostering sustained cultural change—through education, collaborative strategies, and a reimagined disability narrative—we can build a world where inclusion is not an exception but the foundation of design, empowering every individual to thrive.**