

Disability discrimination and diversity in Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

There is no denying that discrimination is wrong, be it in the workplace, in learning or at leisure.

The UK Disability Discrimination Act came into effect in 1995 (with further amendments in October 2003). From the employers' perspective, it set out to ensure that all staff work, without discrimination, with colleagues who may have disabilities. All management and staff are obliged to widen their skills, and where necessary, change their attitude in support of people with disabilities. The responsibility needs to be shared by all staff and if training is required, it must be implemented.

While there can be no doubt that great inroads have been made towards reducing discrimination against people with disabilities (as a result of both voluntary and prescriptive action), there is still a long way to go.

Anti-discrimination directives and initiatives have been implemented not only in the UK, but throughout the EEC. Business has responded by not simply implementing an internal anti-discrimination policy, but by investing in workforce diversity policies. Many have found that these can actually bring important, performance-enhancing benefits to the business.

However, it can be hard to identify a "diverse workplace", relying as it does on measuring the outcome of any shifts in cultural change. And mention must be made of the three prime reasons companies adopt workforce policies that they like to be seen as diverse – those based on honest ethics, those implemented as a result of regulation requirements and those based on economic benefits. It must be added that there are companies that do implement these policies for more than one reason.

"Diversity in the workplace presents a challenge not only to those working in ICT, but for those who manage its development and application."

Margaret Hodge MP, Minister for Disabled People, March 2001

If the technology is used correctly, people with disabilities will not be deprived in the "Information Society" we live in. However, if it is used without due deliberation, there are many who will be excluded and could potentially become the new 'Information Deprived'.

Disability discrimination begins with built technology - the internal and external environment people occupy. This can be shops, offices, schools, hospitals and medical centres, sports centres, recreational areas such as parks, streets and the home, in fact, anywhere where access by people is the norm.

It must be remembered that people with disabilities are taxpayers, employers, employees, teachers, parents, tenants, children, customers, politicians, voters and neighbours. According to the Department for Education and Employment:

"There are currently over 8½ million people with disabilities in the UK – 5½ million of working age with 1.8 million working in limited companies and 382,000 working in small-medium enterprises."

An all-inclusive built environment at large should be designed from the start. Implementing this brings economies of scale (reducing costs) and social inclusion to great benefit to society as a whole.

With ICT, the problems for people with disabilities go further than physical access. Tony Shipley, making a presentation at the British Computer Society 'Access for All Conference' in 2000, said that:

"...something has to be done to prevent networks stopping at the socket."

For access to ICT equipment, people with disability will often require particular features, for example enlarged keys, larger screens, hands-free operation or amplified speech. Installed software may have to be programmed to work differently to the way the IT department usually install them, for example at lower screen resolution for easier readability.

Workstations may have to be adapted to accommodate wheelchairs, or a special chair provided. Screening may be necessary if a voice activation facility is required.

There is no mandate that third party equipment suppliers must sell specially adapted equipment for users with disabilities. To this end, a company will not have the luxury of seeking best value in a competitive supply market chain.

It must be bourn in mind that ICT is one area with a major impact on our daily lives, and this impact will intensify as further deregulation occurs and technology converges – a challenge not only to developers, but ultimately to end-users who are faced with using equipment purchased on a cost-efficient basis which may not necessarily fit the usage in terms of those with a disability.

That having been said, suppliers, in adhering to British and European Standards, do have a duty of care to adapt equipment for use by people with disabilities. Similarly, companies have an equal duty of care in not expecting people with disabilities to be able to use equipment that can only be used correctly, and/or safely by someone without disabilities.

Until deregulation, for example, there were controls in place regarding the supply of PBX - Private Branch Exchange – equipment for visually impaired people. It had to meet certain criteria of usability. Because of convergence, this regulation has since been removed.

However, there have been major advances in PC technology which enables people with disabilities easier access to using ICT. New Windows NT-based technology has enabled special speech and large print software to integrate with existing software systems. This integrated software is now readily available – IntelliDESK (LCD console information displayed on screen), Zoomtext (displays text in large format) and Jaws (reads screen information aloud to the user being three examples).

The ramifications for ICT users go much further than the equipment they need to use or have access to.

Careful thought has to be given to physical access to that equipment. It should be in a location for easy access by anyone with any form of disability. They must have easy access to comfort-break facilities, storage and filing cabinets, canteens and fire exits.

And equally as important, staff with disabilities must be integrated into the staff culture to receive initial and further training and to be offered opportunities for promotion based on their performance.

While it is reasonable to conclude that ICT providers and suppliers should offer goods and services that can be utilised by a wider cross section of the population, there is no reason why the employers in ICT should not do the same.

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