Beyond ticking boxes

Your practical guide to a more accessible and inclusive organization

There are one billion people living with disabilities in the world

From those with impairments that mean they're reliant on wheelchairs and assistive technologies to those with neurodiversities, every situation is unique to each individual. Yet less than one in ten people in need have access to assistive products.[1]

While you may have heard standard terms like 'accessibility features' and 'accessible spaces', perhaps on public transport or when using services like banks or visiting shops, accessibility and inclusion is about people, not compliance. And while you may see ramps in buildings or more sign language on TV, there is still more work to be done at a human level.

Do you know what disabilities exist within your organization?

For businesses, this means making everyday experiences and workplace activities available to and enjoyable for everyone, from the way they move around an office and the interactions they have with colleagues to the tools they use to carry out their roles. Understanding the challenges of disabled people and providing solutions to overcome them is key. To be successful, accessibility and inclusion must be baked into the DNA of a company.

As we find ourselves in an era of immense innovation, technology is one of the ways in which accessibility and inclusion can be enhanced in the workplace. Today, software and hardware is designed with disabilities in mind, enabling more people than ever before to do jobs they wouldn't have been able to do a decade ago. Yet, once again, there's more to be done. The unemployment rate for those with **disabilities** globally is almost double when compared to those without a disability.[2]

This guide is designed to provide education and actionable advice for those seeking to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity within their organization. By following the steps and guidance within this guide, you can not only improve the working life of those with disabilities in your organization, but open the door to a larger talent pool of skilled individuals.

Furthermore, companies that embrace inclusion have been proven to enhance business performance. According to Accenture, companies that have improved their inclusion of persons with disabilities over time were four times more likely than others to have total shareholder returns that outperform those of their peer group.[2]

And inclusion doesn't solely impact those with disabilities either. Your wider workforce will also appreciate and benefit from a culture of openness and inclusivity. It can help overcome fears and stigma related to disability and generate pride in a diverse workplace.

This also reflects on those you do with business with, including your clients and suppliers. As more people see and appreciate your organization's approach to accessibility and inclusion, so their eyes are opened to the positive outcomes and opportunities it affords. And with greater awareness comes even greater positive change.

[1] W.H.O. Assistive Technology Fact Sheet (2018) Global - https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health

[2] Accenture - Getting to Equal 2018: The Disability Inclusion Advantage (2018) Global
https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-89/Accenture-Disability-Inclusion-Research-Report.pdf#zoom=50

What does 'accessibility and inclusion' mean?

At a basic level, accessibility is the act of enabling an individual to interact with a space or product in as close as possible a way as anyone else would. Where, in many cases, accessibility takes the form of an 'accommodation', such as adding ramps to a building or providing specialized equipment, it also applies to the creation of more universal environments designed from scratch to be accessible to all.

That's where inclusion comes in. It means all perspectives are considered when it comes to activities like work, social events and anything else a non-disabled person can take part in. It's what takes accessibility initiatives from mere box-ticking exercises to creating lasting change. Where a business might be required to make its spaces and tools more accessible, inclusion normalizes and standardizes these practices, paying attention to every need, not just traditional workplace requirements.

Accessibility and inclusion are crucial to creating a workplace that welcomes and caters to the needs of every individual.

Accessibility is also about understanding and reacting to the needs of individuals in order to drive inclusion. This could involve getting to know the requirements of disabled colleagues and adapting the workplace to make them more comfortable and able to work more effectively. Or it could simply be ensuring that they know their voice will be heard should they have an issue. Ultimately, everyone's experience is different, which is why communication and awareness is crucial.

Understanding your people and their disabilities

The key to creating an accessible and inclusive workplace is understanding the needs of those within it. Disabilities take many forms, many of which can be hidden, so it's important to not only be aware of them but appreciate the steps you can take to make work easier and more successful for those individuals.

There are also many inaccurate beliefs surrounding the employment of those with disabilities, including the costs involved and performance-related concerns. However, a survey of US employers of employees with disabilities found that almost two-thirds believe the cost of employing a person with a disability is the same as hiring a person without a disability.

A third of employers perceived employees with disabilities to be more dedicated and less likely to leave the job.[3]

According to the US Job Accomodation Network, 58% of businesses surveyed in 2017 said the accommodations needed by their employees cost absolutely nothing. Those that did pay for an accommodation spent USD500 per disabled employee on average.[4]

DuPont Corporation has been tracking disabled employees through surveys since 1973. When grading employees with disabilities on the same scale as other employees, DuPont found that 90% of disabled employees received performance ratings of *average* or *above average*.[5]

Here are some examples of disabilities you may encounter in the workplace and examples of accessibility features that can help the individuals living with them work at their best.

Vision

Visual impairment could mean an individual who is blind, colour blind or has low vision. In addition to space-related accessibility features in the office, they benefit from solutions like magnified screens, screen readers, text to speech functionality, high contrast displays and other customization options like video call backgrounds and background blur.

Mobility

Those with a mobility impairment are restricted in their movement. This could include the inability to use limbs, walk or manipulate objects easily or at all. Those with reduced motor function such as amputees, those with spinal injuries or quadriplegia may require a wheelchair or crutches to aid their mobility and may also need tools to help them operate a computer more easily. This could include dictation features, keyboard shortcuts, eye control and voice navigation.

Hearing

Employees who are deaf, have hearing loss or are hard of hearing might rely on autogenerated video captions, real-time subtitles and transcription, visual alerts and mono audio functions. They may also require an interpreter for face-to-face meetings.

Neurodiversity and mental health

Often not immediately obvious, neurodiversity and mental health applies to those living with dyslexia, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other cognitive differences, as well as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Actions, locations and features that help bring clarity to reading and limit distraction are key for these individuals.

[3] SHRM, Kessler Report (2010) USA - https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/news-about-shrm/Pages/default.aspx

[4] Job Accommodation Network (2020) USA - https://askjan.org/topics/costs.cfm

[5] NGA, An Untapped Talent Pool: The Opportunity in Employing People with Disabilities (2017) USA - https://medium.com/nga-economic-opportunity/an-untapped-talent-pool-the-opportunity-in-employing-people-with-disabilities-77be9f76339c

The role of technology in accessibility and inclusion

Given that technology shapes the way modern businesses operate, it's no surprise that many leaders in the productivity space now prioritize accessibility. From video conferencing to word processing and display customization, the tools we use for work are more accessible than ever.

The standard productivity platform for businesses around the world, Microsoft Office 365, is the most accessible release of the software. Across the suite, accessibility features are built in to make the lives of those with disabilities easier. Here are some examples:
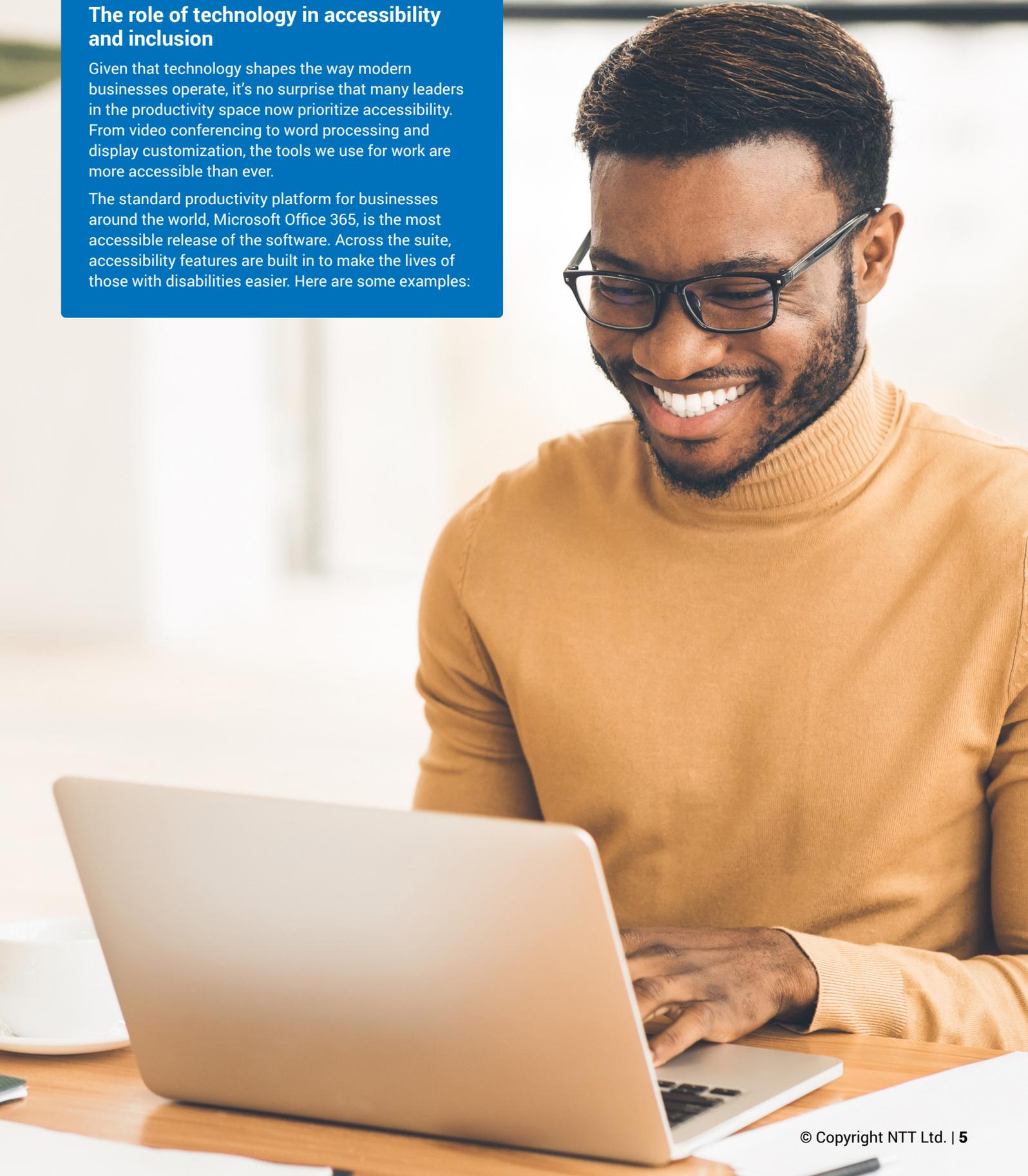
Microsoft Office 365 and Windows 10

- For those with low or no vision, Office provides keyboard shortcuts and compatibility with screen readers, while the **Tell Me** feature lets users quickly access commands without navigating the command ribbon.

- In Outlook, users can automatically inform colleagues that they prefer to receive accessible content so that they get emails they can read more easily. With a simple click of a button, users can run **Accessibility Checker** to ensure the Office document they are working on is easy for people of all disabilities to read and edit. This includes the images and colours used, the heading structure and reading order.

- For those with reading difficulties, **Reading view** helps clear clutter from the screen so only the text users want to read is visible. This can also be displayed in fonts that are easier to read for people with dyslexia.

- **Microsoft Translator** and **Presentation Translator** can display auto-generated subtitles and captions for those with a hearing impairment when watching videos or presentations.

  For those with hearing loss or deafness in one ear, Windows 10 can be configured to play the same sounds from both speakers so nothing is lost.

Seeing AI

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is playing a major role in making life easier for those with disabilities, and Microsoft's Seeing AI app is a great example.

The app digests information from the world around a user and explains what it sees to them. This includes pieces of text that can be read back to the user as well as products, people and other objects like currency.

- Notifications can also be set to appear visually and more prominently rather than play an alert sound. And if alerts and notifications distract a user from their work, they can turn on **Focus Assist** to restrict all interruptions or limit them to those on a special list. When they have finished focusing, a summary of alerts is provided.

- To improve experiences for those with mobility restrictions, Office 365 enables them to type with their voice using **Dictate** and even navigate using **Windows Speech Recognition**. Users can only use the keyboard to control Office applications too or, alternatively, use a pointing device to type on screen.

- Windows 10 also offers support for eye control so users with **eye-tracking hardware** can navigate without a keyboard or mouse.

Microsoft Teams

With more users than ever collaborating, meeting and staying organized with Microsoft Teams, it's important that disabled users are able to do the same, especially when working from home or in remote locations.

- Teams provides a range of accessibility features, including **live captioning** for meetings, background noise suppression and the ability to add a co-worker or interpreter to a call.

- Distractions can be limited with **Do Not Disturb** mode, while language translation, viewing and reading customizations and audio messages and dictation enable fluid communication.

- Teams' built-in **calendar** and **scheduling** helps users stay on top of their workday and avoid the frustration of meeting clashes or not having enough time to complete tasks.

- Teams and Office 365 are compatible with a wide range of **screen readers**, such as Narrator, and dictation software, as well as eye and voice control.

- **Immersive Reader** helps those with dyslexia, visual impairments or other reading difficulties quickly access a clearer view of text, have text read to them and customize text backgrounds and font styles among many other features.

Say *hello* to Andrew and Isabelle – your team members

Meet Andrew and Isabelle, two people living with very different disabilities. In the workplace, they rely on a range of technologies to help them get work done. With the aid of accessibility features in the Microsoft software and hardware they use, as well as understanding and support from their colleagues, both can be more productive and enjoy their work.

Below, we'll look at how Andrew and Isabelle's disabilities impact their work and how Microsoft technologies can help.

Andrew

Andrew is an autistic financial analyst. He enjoys the structure of his work but is easily distracted by background noise and interruptions from colleagues.

He prefers to have conversations digitally rather than face-to-face so he can consider his responses.

To those unaware of Andrew's disability, he can seem uninterested or aloof during conversations, or may fixate on details that seem unimportant to others but are key to helping him understand the situation better.

He can also become frustrated if schedules change at short notice or explanations are unclear.

How can technology help?

- **Noise-cancelling** headphones to reduce background noise.
- **Do Not Disturb in Teams** and Focus assist in Windows 10 to block distracting notifications.
- Reading view in Windows 10 to **eliminate on-screen clutter** and improve focus.
- Calendar in Teams and Outlook to **plan tasks** and provide a clear view of Andrew's daily activities.
- Chat in Teams to **reduce spontaneous face-to-face conversations** and provide Andrew with more time to consider his responses.

How can the business and colleagues provide support?

- Position Andrew's workspace in a **quiet area of the office, away from air conditioning, elevators and meeting rooms.**
- Make **meeting rooms available** as a space for focus.
- Avoid **unnecessary distractions** when Andrew is focusing.
- Give clear, **detailed instructions**.
- Provide **adequate time** for Andrew to complete tasks.
- Avoid adding **last-minute meetings or tight deadlines** to Andrew's schedule.
- Send Andrew **longer messages spaced using Alt+Return** rather than multiple short messages.

Isabelle

Isabelle is an office administrator who is partially sighted. She works from home two days per week and uses a screen reader to convert text into speech in documents and on web pages.

She has access to an interpreter when she attends face-to-face meetings.

She uses her voice and the keyboard to navigate on her computer but often finds the documents and emails she is sent aren't accessible and can miss key information.

Sometimes, the meetings and presentations she attends refer to images on screen or a slide with no further detail offered.

This frustrates Isabelle and makes her feel like she hasn't been provided with all the details she needs to understand the content of the presentation and what is being referenced.

How can technology help?

- Use **assistive technologies**, such as Narrator screen reader and keyboard shortcuts with Office 365.
- Use an **Office365 MailTip** in Outlook to let colleagues know of Isabelle's preference for accessible content.
- Use **Seeing AI for narration** describing people, text and objects.
- Use **Windows Hello or fingerprint scanning** to log in to Windows devices.
- **Customize icons**, adjust text size and colour in Windows 10.

How can the business and colleagues provide support?

- Run **Accessibility Checker** before sending emails and documents to Isabelle to make sure the content is accessible.
- Include **alt text image descriptions** to explain images within content.
- Provide **presentation content** to Isabelle ahead of time.
- When presenting, avoid assuming everyone can see what's on a slide and **explain important visual information clearly**.
- Allow **Isabelle's interpreter to join Teams meetings** and ensure shared content is compatible with screen reading software.
- Make shared videos compatible with **audio description**.

Where are you on your digital journey?

More than just compliance, accessibility and inclusion is about istening and increasing awareness to improve understanding. Whatever initiatives you put in place and actions you take in the workplace; you must constantly re-evaluate and question your methods.

By talking to those with disabilities in your business and establishing bodies to challenge accessibility standards, you not only improve experiences, but begin making accessibility and inclusion part of the fabric of your company.

From a digital perspective, this can begin by assessing the tools you use and whether they are suitable for those with disabilities. Legacy hardware and software may not be fit for purpose or compatible with the latest accessibility tools. You should also consider the accessibility mindset of your technology suppliers. Will they support you on your journey or is accessibility an afterthought? Can they answer your questions regarding assistive technologies?

As technology improves, so do the opportunities to deliver more accessible experiences. Cloud-based software that's regularly updated rather than being overhauled every few years means the latest and greatest functionality is always available - including accessibility features. This includes accessibility features.

Where does your organization stand?

Answer the following questions to determine changes you could make to enhance accessibility and inclusion in the workplace.

- Is your HR team aware of and capable of deploying or enabling accessible technology and features?

- Are disabled employees aware of the accessibility features they have access to?

- Are all employees aware of the features they can use to make content more accessible?

- Does the technology you use provide flexibility to accommodate the needs of disabled users?

- Are meeting rooms and video conferencing technology available and accessible?

- Are regular meetings held with disabled employees or employee groups to identify technology challenges?

- Do you have an accessibility policy and do your external suppliers adhere to it?

- Is training and information provided to employees on how they can support and include those with disabilities?

- Do you regularly take the time to understand your employees' needs/disabilities? If so, how?

- Are you aware of investments your employees could be making to make working easier for them? (technology/time)

- Do you understand the types (both hidden and visible) of disability within your organization?
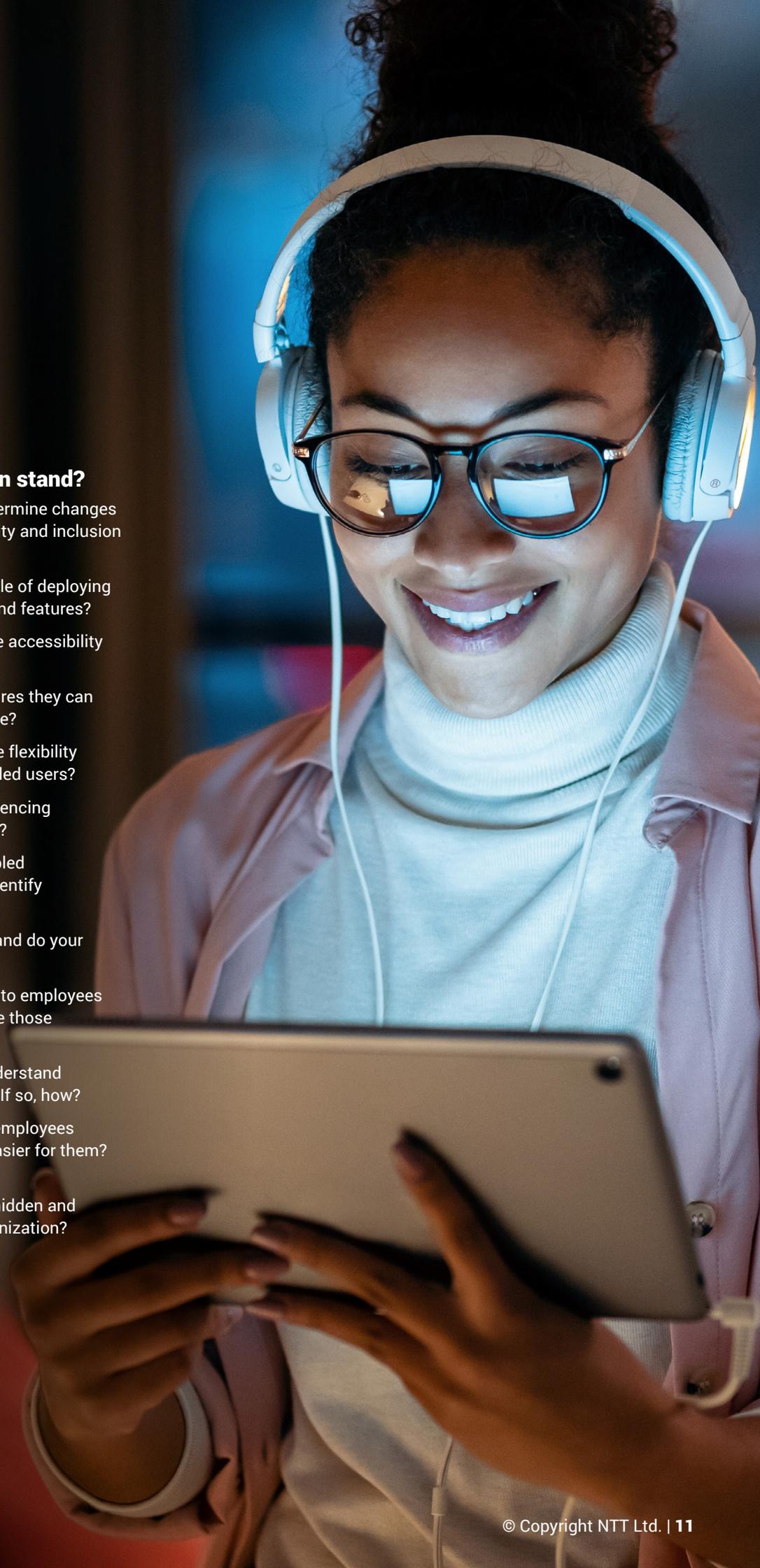
Driving change within your organization

Through policies and training as well as technology investments, you can take great strides toward an accessible and inclusive workplace, ensuring that all employees are involved.

There are simple steps that can make a huge difference, like ensuring physical barriers don't restrict those with limited mobility or prevent them from interacting effectively in meetings. Standardized actions like including captions and alt text and checking documents for accessibility issues can also be quickly implemented.

Everyone has a part to play, and the faster accessibility and inclusion awareness is built into the culture of a business, the faster improvements can be made. Inclusive workplaces are proven to improve staff retention, with studies suggesting that disabled employees help non-disabled individuals to be more aware of their challenges and how to make the workplace more inclusive.

'The amount of notifications was hard to tackle for people with dyslexia. Rather than rely on a customized layout, **we considered the @ mention feature and how people could use that to further ensure we tied this to the immersive reader function.**'

Michele Farmer, Digital Accessibility Technologist, University College London

So how do you embed a more inclusive culture? By following these steps you can quickly progress your accessibility and inclusion journey.

1 Policies

Begin by understanding what disabilities exist within your organization. Ensure that the basics are in place, including whether your building and technology comply with relevant disability requirements.

It's also important to implement a recognized employee resource group with a focus on disability if one isn't already in place.

Your external policy should mention disability on your website and the accommodation process should be available and clearly outlined in your company's literature.

2 Hiring

Implement targeted hiring efforts focused on those with disabilities and ensure executive-level sponsorship of the employee resource group.

Engage with HR teams to produce the best possible hiring practices, inclusive interviewing processes and development opportunities.

It's also important to highlight this action to all stakeholders so that they can consider how a disabled employee would fit in their team as well as opening opportunities for roles that would ideally suit specific disabilities or provide different perspectives.

Those with disabilities should be considered for roles across all levels and areas of the organization.

3 Resources

With more of a focus on disability in the workplace, a centralized accommodation process should be implemented.

Videos and training produced outside of the company should be accessible and dedicated support channels for those with disabilities should be set up.

The workforce should also be kept updated on accessibility activity across internal and external events and all internal training should be inclusive of disability.

A written statement should exist highlighting your commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

4 Measurement

To measure the effectiveness of your efforts, the company should participate in a recognized, industry-wide survey of disability inclusion. Disabled employees should be encouraged to self-identify their disabilities and be surveyed as to their satisfaction with the company's efforts.

An ecosystem of support for disability inclusion should be implemented, including mentor rings or support circles. Support, mentoring and coaching should be provided to ensure those with disabilities have the opportunity to progress their careers in line with their peers.

Where appropriate, the input and perspectives of disabled people should be sought in as many processes and projects as possible. This might involve organizing a specific internal team of advocates or those who have shown an interest in supporting such activities.

5 Extension

All practices should be extended to regional and global offices as applicable, with organizational support for accessibility and inclusion.

Explore further projects based on the success of your initiatives that provide business value and support the wider accessibility and inclusion agenda.

This could include investigating ways to adapt products to those with disabilities or provide specific services for them. Through policy and process design, implement standards for workplace accessibility and consider them each time new spaces are created or renovated.

The external impact of accessibility and inclusion

While accessibility and inclusion has many benefits internally, it can also enhance the way a business performs and is thought of by its peers and clients.

The following facts and stats highlight the importance of those with disabilities (hidden and physical) in the workforce and the wider impact of accessibility and inclusion.

Disabled adults are a huge market for businesses, with disabled people in the US forming the **third-largest market segment** after Hispanics and African- Americans.[2]

Disabled employees can help **drive innovation inside a business** and in its products and services to provide different perspectives that might otherwise not be considered.

Disabled people are interested in companies leading in accessibility and inclusion and want to support them. Nielsen found that **disabled people are more likely to be loyal to a brand**, shop more often and spend more than the average consumer.[7]

Disabled people and their families have a spending power of **274 billion euros**, but only 10% of businesses in the UK have a strategy to access this market.[6]

75% of disabled people in the UK have left a store or online shop due to poor customer service or accessibility issues.[8]

Most consumers want to transact with businesses supporting accessibility and inclusion, with 92% having a more favourable view of companies that hire people with disabilities, while **78% will buy from a business that ensures easy access for individuals with disabilities.**[9]

[2] Accenture - Getting to Equal 2018: The Disability Inclusion Advantage (2018) Global
https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-89/Accenture-Disability-Inclusion-Research-Report.pdf#zoom=50

[6] Enable Magazine - Purple Tuesday (2020) UK - http://enablemagazine.co.uk/purple-tuesday-making-the-accessible-amend/

[7] Nielsenniq (2021) Global - https://nielseniq.com/global/en/insights/

[8] AIR, A Hidden Market: The Purchasing Power of Working-Age Adults With Disabilities (2018) USA
https://www.air.org/system/files/downloads/report/Hidden-Market-Spending-Power-of-People-with-Disabilities-April-2018.pdf

[9] Disabled Candidates Represent Huge Pool of Untapped Talent (2018) UK
https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/employers/blog/disabled-candidates-represent-huge-pool-of-untapped-talent/

In the UK, people with disabilities have a **9.1% unemployment rate compared to 3.6% for non-disabled people.**[10]

What does the future look like?

As more businesses launch or seek to improve accessibility and inclusion in the workplace, the future looks bright for workers of all disability types and the companies that employ them. Furthermore, with major technology companies like NTT and Microsoft leading the way and technologies developing at a remarkable pace, new innovations and standards are yet to come. Ground-breaking achievements like public autonomous vehicles could become gamechangers in the mobility space, while powerful AI will further improve the way people interact with technology and the world around them.

This represents a huge opportunity for companies willing to employ people with disabilities. Not only will a more diverse and inclusive approach help provide new perspectives, enhance innovation and boost productivity, but it enables companies to access a far larger talent pool than before. And, with more people with disabilities in the workforce, your business can join others in seeing bottom-line benefits that show proven ROI from inclusive recruitment.[11]

With the learnings from this guide and a dedication to improving experiences, your business can help continue to drive the accessibility agenda. As more companies follow your lead we will continue on a path toward a fully inclusive world where accessibility is no longer a special consideration but a global norm.

For additional accessibility and inclusion support, take a look at the following resources:

- Microsoft Accessibility at a Glance video series
- World Health Organization Disability Site
- Microsoft Accessibility Video Training for Office 365
- Check the accessibility of websites and apps with Accessibility Insights
- Microsoft Teams Accessibility Support
- UK Government Accessibility Guidance

'The ability to focus in busy environments is difficult for me as I have been suffering with Meniere's disease for some time and my hearing is gradually deteriorating. Having the best possible hardware and accessibility features enabled on Teams has **significantly improved my productivity and provided an effortless experience in meetings, calls and during Live Events.**'

Elaine Riley, Product Marketing Director, Unified Communications, Cloud Communications, NTT

Get in touch today to register your interest in a free, fully funded Microsoft Teams workshop and start your journey to a more inclusive workplace.

[10] Disabled Candidates Represent Huge Pool of Untapped Talent (2018) UK
https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/employers/blog/disabled-candidates-represent-huge-pool-of-untapped-talent/

[11] JAN, Disability Employment and Inclusion: Your Guide to Success (2018) USA
https://askjan.org/training/Handouts/upload/Disability-Employment-and-Inclusion_Your-Guide-to-Success.pdf

NTT