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Workplace Accessibility Starter Kit

Introduction

Companies that invest in disability inclusion have been shown to gain a variety of benefits, including better financial performance and lower turnover – not to mention access to a largely untapped talent pool. With more than 1 billion people in the world living with a disability, an accessible workplace is essential.

The progress of our accessibility journey at Microsoft accelerated when we began prioritizing accessibility and managing it like a business. In 2016, we developed the Accessibility Evolution Model, a maturity model framework to measure progress year over year and guide goal-setting. Based in part on the Carnegie Mellon Capability Model and the Level Access Digital Accessibility Maturity Model, we customized it for Microsoft and have been using and refining it ever since. While our journey is by no means complete, we now share this model to help other organizations accelerate their own journeys.

If the Accessibility Evolution Model is a roadmap for the journey, then the **Workplace Accessibility Starter Kit** is a toolkit for making the employee experience more accessible. Our goal is to share the most valuable lessons we've learned thus far in our journey towards becoming more disability inclusive. Although we acknowledge that every organization's journey will look different, we hope to provide a starting point for employers looking to make their employee experience more disability inclusive.

Microsoft announced its intention to "build an inclusive workplace culture that empowers employees with disabilities to achieve their career aspirations and scale our culture of accessibility" as part of its larger 2021 commitment to Bridge the Disability Divide. Core to this intention is the belief that disability is a strength, one that is beneficial to organizations, offering greater innovation, improved business performance and broader appeal to attract and retain top talent. People are a central focus within this broader plan. Or goal in thigs realm us to expand opportunities for people with disabilities to thrive at work, school, and home.

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Making workplace inclusion a priority

Even with great intentions, however, prioritizing accessibility and inclusion can be hard for any organization. In a recent World Economic Forum survey,* only 4% of global businesses reported prioritizing disability inclusivity.

Our own journey at Microsoft is ongoing, and progress has been iterative. We also find tremendous value in periodically reflecting on what we have learned so far – to assess impact and identify where there are gaps. We seek to share our learnings with others, offering suggestions and opportunities that might help other organizations jumpstart their workplace efforts. This document outlines our five recommended opportunities for doing so.

For additional information:

Reaching Prevalent, Diverse Consumers with Disabilities, Nielsen, 2016, "Measuring the impact of consumers"

Disability:IN, Accenture, and AAPD, "Getting to equal: The disability inclusion advantage." 2018

*Despite progress toward inclusion, report finds few employees openly identify as disabled [hr-brew.com]

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Rally executive sponsorship

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Rally executive sponsorship

Leaders signal importance and urgency around the prioritization of cultural initiatives for any organization. Leadership models differ from organization to organization, but when sponsors themselves are enthusiastic about the topic, there is usually added support. We recommend you seek out sponsors who care about the cause, and ask them to help in the following ways:

- Empower the business to make accessibility a strategic priority

- Set expectations and align goals

- Prioritize resources

- Influence employee behavior

- Build additional support across the organization

Engaging our leaders to help initiate and lead change has helped our team drive effective change. We developed a list of talking points to consider when you seek support.

Say why you chose them.
Make it clear why you chose them versus any other leader in another function; this also serves to clarify the nature of their contribution.

Connect to their business priorities.
Know their business. **Accessibility is good business** – it increases the relevancy of offerings to more customers/employees and can often solve other scenarios in new and innovative ways. Your proposal should help solve a relevant problem or take advantage of an opportunity that helps their business.

Be ready with the benchmarks.
The first question you will almost always get once you have outlined your proposal is, "What are other companies doing in this area?" Have comparison data points ready.

Be specific about their role.
When seeking executive sponsorship, make it clear what you are asking for and the time commitment.

For additional information:

[Getting too Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage | Accenture](#)

[The Case for Disability Inclusion in ESG Investing - Disability:IN](#)

Govern centrally; execute locally

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Govern centrally; execute locally

Achieving workplace accessibility requires buy-in from all employees. For employees with disabilities, this means proper representation and support. For employees without disabilities and managers, this means empathy, understanding, and skill-building. We adopted a hub and spoke program management approach to drive cultural change needed at Microsoft. Doing so allows us to centralize information dissemination and stakeholder management.

Advocacy also plays an important role in driving change management and adoption. We recruited a team of volunteer evangelists/champions to help deploy best practices and activate engagement across the organization. We continue to evolve our approach, but the following tactics have proven to be effective so far:

A predictable rhythm of business
We meet regularly, both as a full group and per individual divisions.

Defined volunteer roles.
In our instance there are multiple roles assigne each division. Each is focused on a specific are responsibility. It is helpful to give volunteers a understanding of how they can promote inclu accessibility. Tie the work to Diversity & Inclus commitments when possible.

Input from internal experts and partners.
Accessibility leadership can often take hold fir specialized areas like engineering and Human Resources. If this is the case, it is helpful to lev subject matter experts in those domains to he educate others and build advocacy.

A standard approach to measuring progress.
This applies to all divisions represented within the community.

Sharing findings.
Local groups can share findings and lessons le support other markets.
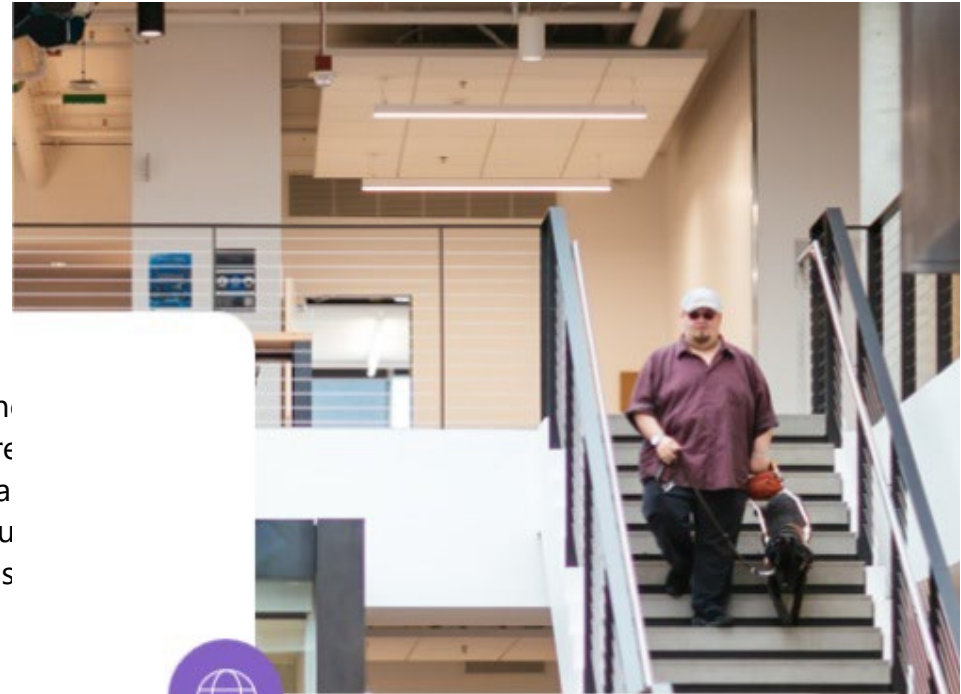
For additional information:

[Introduction to Disability and Accessibility (audio described version) - YouTube](#)

[The Carnegie Mellon Maturity Model](#)

[Level Access Digital Accessibility Maturity Model](#)

[Accessibility Evolution Model: Creating Clarity in your Accessibility Journey - Microsoft Accessibility Blog](#)

[Microsoft accessibility evolution model - YouTube](#)

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Foster understanding and belonging

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"Nothing about us without us"

Foster understanding and belonging

Inclusive work environments benefit when employees have a sense of belonging. Recent research by the firm Better Up* revealed the benefits of inclusion for employees who felt like they belonged:

- 50% reduced turnover rate

- 55% increase in job performance

- 75% reduced sick days

We focus on specific initiatives to help promote community and belonging for employees with disabilities. For employees with disabilities sharing is often linked to the notion of belonging.

The opportunity to share experiences signals inclusion and psychological safety. When employees with disabilities choose to share their experiences, it can help other employees find community and inspire the confidence needed to navigate the workplace environment more effectively. While sharing is entirely voluntary, we help identify forums and platforms where employees can tell their stories in a positive light.

Disability Employee Resource/Affinity Groups can also play a vital role in supporting employees with disabilities. At Microsoft, for example, they are dedicated to fostering "a culture where everyone is valued, encouraged to come as they are and empowered to achieve more." They often offer employees with disabilities opportunities to share, learn and connect with other employees with similar experiences. This power of connection plays an important role in creating a space where employees with disabilities and their allies can build understanding, share best practices, and find answers to questions.

Finally, we also see merit in fostering a culture of learning around accessibility and inclusion for all employees. Workplace inclusion is everyone's responsibility, and we drive awareness and adoption through recent tactics like our volunteer evangelist community and the rollout of a company-wide introductory training on accessibility/disability inclusion.

For additional information:

ERG Maturity Model Matrix - Disability:IN (disabilityin.org)

Accessibility fundamentals - Learn | Microsoft Docs

*The Value of Belonging at Work: New Frontiers for Inclusion in 2021 and Beyond [betterup.com]

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Make the workplace accessible

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Make the workplace accessible

Drive accessibility of internal tools

Every organization will need to prioritize aspects of their workplace differently, depending on their organizational size, industry, customer base, etc. At Microsoft, we have prioritized workplace technology, supplier management and campus accessibility.

Inclusive Workplace Technology

Microsoft employees depend heavily on tools and technology in the workplace. Recognizing this opportunity, we identified improving tool accessibility as a central pillar within our program. Tool accessibility is an ongoing journey and requires a long-term perspective. Some steps that were helpful to get up and running:

- Identified technology related accessibility guidelines

- Continuously working to understand how employees with disabilities use our tools in the workplace

- Obtained leadership support to prioritize accessibility of tools

To ensure an accessible work environment, it is important to operate Microsoft technology accessibly. The following resources describe how our products can be managed with accessibility in mind:

- [Accessibility help & learning (microsoft.com)](#)

- [Accessibility guide for Microsoft 365 Apps - Deploy Office | Microsoft Learn](#)

- [Microsoft Accessibility Blog - Making technology easier to see, hear and use!](#)

- [Windows 11 Accessibility Features | Microsoft](#)

We always encourage our tool owners to build employee facing tools and apps in an inclusive manner, using our technology and platforms, and taking advantage of how they are designed for accessibility. It's often helpful to have employees with disabilities test tools in the workplace. Their feedback is invaluable for understanding tool accessibility.

There is also a lot of guidance for how to build tools with inclusion in mind. Good examples of how our products are designed for accessibility include:

- [Make your SharePoint site accessible to people with disabilities (microsoft.com)](#)

- [Accessibility tools for Microsoft Teams](#)

- [Making apps accessible | Microsoft Power Apps](#)

For more information:

[Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - Wikipedia](#)

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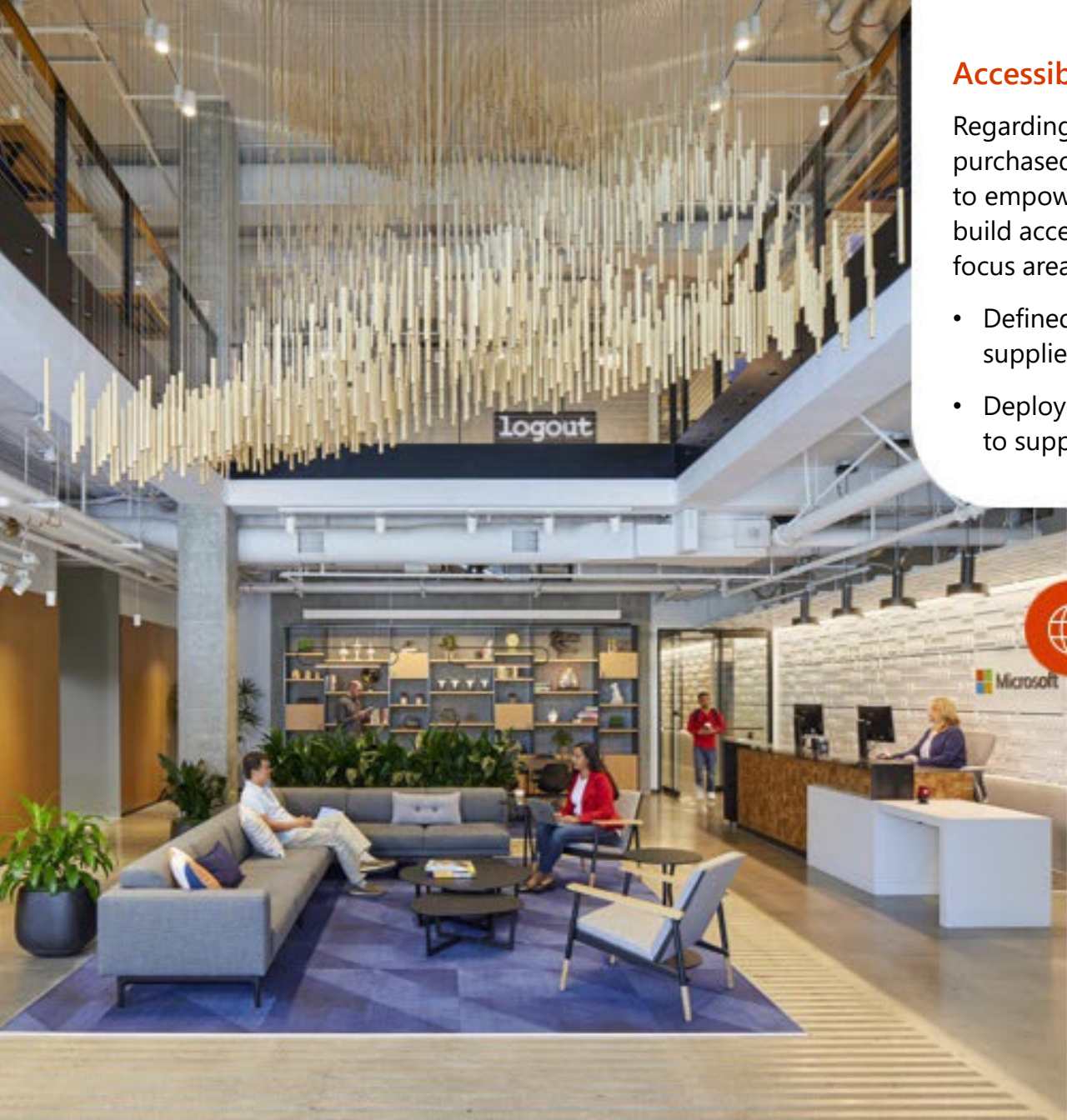
Accessible procurement

Regarding technology developed by or purchased from third-party suppliers, we strive to empower our employees and suppliers to build accessible goods and services. Specific focus areas include:

- Defined accessibility expectations for suppliers, procurement staff, and buyer

- Deployed accessibility training and resources to support our suppliers and employees

Building accessibility

Universal accessibility "quietly fosters a culture of inclusivity by putting everyone on equal footing in the workplace."* We want our workspaces to provide the greatest accessibility for as many people in as many scenarios as possible, so we approach design with universal accessibility in mind. For example, building a ramp instead of stairs creates access for bicyclists and delivery staff pushing wheeled carts, in addition to people using wheelchairs.

For more information:

Procurement:

Supplier Accessibility Toolkit

Introduction - Disability:IN

Train and Educate for Accessible Procurement

Full Microsoft Supplier Toolkit Accessibility Resources

Building Blocks of an Accessible Procurement Program - Disability:IN

Building Accessibility:

Microsoft Accessibility – YouTube

*Accessibility Is for Everyone | LinkedIn

Lead with an **internal** communications strategy

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Lead with an internal communications strategy

A communications strategy is vital to drive awareness to accessibility and inclusion as business priorities for all employees. Employee engagement is key to driving cultural change needed to support the efforts. The following tips and tricks have proven helpful in our efforts to keep employees and stakeholders engaged:

✓ **Make accessibility relevant for everyone.** For example, inclusive communicators reach more people, more effectively – not just those with disabilities.

✓ **Highlight the benefit of shared experiences and community.** Self-identification is a great opportunity for all employees. Consider using it as a call to action.

✓ **Share best practices** for how to drive inclusion and accessibility, including for employees who may not self-identify as having a disability.

✓ **Demonstrate accessibility best practices in communications.** Always check the accessibility of emails, documents, and other content before sharing. Microsoft 365 makes it easy with a built-in Accessibility checker.

> ▶ **Check out 10 habits to create accessible content for tips on making your communications as inclusive as possible.**

✓ **Provide one or two concrete calls to action** to try to help make the message stick and activate desired behavior.

For more information:

For Microsoft Products you can use the built in Accessibility Checker.

For web-based apps you can leverage Accessibility Insights, a free automated testing tool.

Workplace accessibility for all

People with disabilities at Microsoft have done amazing work to improve our products, our features, and accessibility in everything we do. They are often our first and best customers who provide feedback on the usability of products and how the user experience can be made more intuitive for everyone.

Disability inclusive companies are more productive, innovative, and better at hiring and retaining talent, and employees with disabilities should be at the center of this programming. There is no one-size fits all approach or roadmap for fostering accessibility in the workplace. We continue to listen and learn from our employees about where we have done good work and where we need to continue to improve. Developing a disability inclusive culture is unique to each organization and making the employee experience accessible is a continuous process of improvement. At Microsoft, we are still on our journey. We are excited to see other organizations join the effort and hope we can help by sharing our experiences to date.

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