Building an inclusive workplace

How assistive technologies help organisations create accessible environments for their people

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The journey towards accessibility for all

Accessibility is all about building processes that work for people. It's about giving employees the tools and support they need to thrive in their roles—and, increasingly, organisations are realising its value.

In this paper, we'll explore the push for improved accessibility, how it benefits employees and organisations, and how technologies like speech recognition are helping businesses make their workplaces more inclusive.

An accessibility mandate

Of the 8.4 million disabled people of working age in the UK, just 4.4 million (53.6%) are currently in work, compared to 81.7% of those who aren't disabled. [1]

That dramatic employment gap is down to a lot of different factors, from individual circumstances to institutional barriers. And although many people with disabilities aren't able to work at all, there are also many who are only held back by a lack of accessibility in the workplace.

The 2010 Equality Act set a precedent with a mandate to provide "reasonable adjustments" to accommodate different levels of ability in the workplace. [2] In response, many businesses have adapted to help their employees get the support they need to work comfortably and effectively. That's included both structural changes, like widening doorways or installing ramps, and process changes, such as introducing assistive technology or reassigning tasks.

The government then made further steps to boost workplace inclusivity in 2016, with the launch of Disability Confident. This multi-stage scheme guides employers through becoming more accessible, and helps potential employees and customers identify inclusive organisations. More than 20,000 employers have already signed up, with over 11 million people benefiting from the programme. [3]

1 researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7540/CBP-7540.pdf
2 legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/chapter/2/crossheading/adjustments-for-disabled-persons
3 disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk

The future of accessible work

The UK government aims to get 1 million more disabled people in work by 2027. [4] That means many employers need to assess their workplaces and working practices to ensure they're accessible to as many people as possible.

This work is also essential to create better accommodations for disabled employees already within organisations, many of whom will have been working in conditions that aren't quite right for them to thrive in their role. Employers need to make sure people get the opportunity to voice their needs, and make it clear which accessibility solutions are available.

True accessibility starts from the moment a potential employee encounters a job advert, and carries right through to the moment they move on or retire. Something as simple as removing a driving licence requirement for a role that doesn't necessarily need one—especially in the age of remote work—can open up careers to more people.

Improving accessibility is vital for employee wellbeing, but it's also important for organisations. Next, we'll discuss how accessibility helps organisations access a wider pool of talent and create an inclusive culture.

4 assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/663399/improving-lives-the-future-of-work-health-and-disability.PDF

Over 20,000 UK employers are now Disability Confident, supporting more than 11 million employees.

The benefits of an inclusive workplace

In the future, the most successful organisations will be those that focus on inclusion, diversity, and accessibility. As the CIPD explains: "While UK legislation [...] sets minimum standards, an effective inclusion and diversity strategy goes beyond legal compliance and seeks to add value to an organisation, contributing to employee wellbeing and engagement." [5]

So how does accessibility translate into value for organisations?

Happier employees work better
Focusing on accessibility helps create processes that work for people, not the other way around.

And although that may sound counterintuitive from a business perspective, it's hugely beneficial in the long run. When processes are designed to be simple, efficient, and accessible, employees are happier and more productive—which translates into more value for the organisation. Recent research from the University of Oxford found that happy employees are 13% more productive. [6]

People thrive with the proper support
Getting the best from employees relies on creating the conditions they need to thrive at work. Many organisations will have a lot of employees who have accessibility needs that have gone unnoticed or unserved, especially if they don't have a significant impact on their role. In some cases, this might have quietly affected their entire career so far.

But supporting those needs—even the 'minor' ones— can help people excel. Removing as many barriers as possible gives people the space they need to do their best work.

5 cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/diversity/factsheet
6 papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3470734

Accessible workplaces attract and retain talent
By removing barriers during recruitment, employers can also access a broader talent pool than before, ensuring they're hiring the best of the best for their organisation.

And as employees' health and circumstances change over their career, they're far more likely to stay with an organisation that adapts to accommodate their new needs, rather than finding a new employer or leaving the workforce entirely.

Forward-thinking organisations encourage innovation
More accessible workplaces are naturally more diverse, which brings new voices and perspectives into the business. This often makes it a more dynamic and innovative organisation, where different ideas and inventive approaches to problem-solving are shared. That's part of the reason why accessibility, inclusivity, and diversity are so important—and such a public focus—for major companies like Microsoft[7] and Google. [8]

"An effective inclusion and diversity strategy goes beyond legal compliance and seeks to add value to an organisation, contributing to employee wellbeing and engagement."

— Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

7 blogs.microsoft.com/blog/2021/04/28/doubling-down-on-accessibility-microsofts-next-steps-to-expand-accessibility-in-technology-the-workforce-and-workplace/
8 diversity.google

The power of assistive technology

To realise these benefits, it's vital that organisations talk directly to their people, listen to their needs, and identify which adjustments, accommodations, and technologies are right for them.

There are so many different technologies available to support people with visual, auditory, and physical disabilities, and hidden impairments such as dyslexia. And assistive technology doesn't just benefit disabled employees; adjusting the way your organisation works can help every employee find a working method that suits them.

The available options span from heavy equipment such as wheelchair lifts to office equipment like ergonomic keyboards. There's software too, such as screen readers and speech recognition tools. Whatever needs employees have, there are ways to make their working lives easier.

Adapting to working life
Let's explore a real-life example of assistive technology at work.

Katherine Beavis is an Executive Team Assistant for the Business Disability Forum, a non-profit that helps disabled people find stable employment. She was born with congenital right-sided semi-hemiparesis, spasticity bilateral schizencephaly, partial epilepsy, and dyslexia—a combination of conditions that primarily affect the right half of her brain and can cause seizures.

Over the years, Katherine has used a huge range of assistive technologies at work. She currently uses a specialised keyboard, which allows her to complete multi-key actions with a single press, and an upright mouse, which helps her keep her wrist in a more natural position. "I can type up to 30 words per minute just with my left hand," says Katherine. "I type with my left hand and just use my right hand for the enter and function keys."

When she joined the Business Disability Forum, Katherine was introduced to Dragon Professional Anywhere, our speech recognition solution. Dragon uses natural language understanding to translate speech into text. It's a fast, accurate way to create everything from simple plain-text notes to lengthy reports and complex spreadsheets. After many years of using a digital recorder, Katherine can now dictate directly onto her computer, with the ability to navigate and edit her documents and correspondence using voice commands.

Dragon is highly effective out of the box, but training the engine to recognise her voice, preferences, and habits by reading scripts—and even just chatting to the tool—meant the solution was even more closely tailored to Katherine's individual accessibility needs.

"Even if I'm talking fast or using slang, chatting rather than dictating, it recognises what I'm saying. It even copes well when I'm tired, and my speech is a bit slurred, whereas the built-in speech recognition on computers just gives up," says Katherine.

Speech recognition is proving a popular option for many organisations and employees. In the next section, we'll explore more about how this versatile solution gives employees the ability to work with their voices.

"With Dragon I can be more effective, and most days I feel I can cope with anything."

— Katherine Beavis, Executive Team Assistant for the Business Disability Forum and Dragon User

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Accessibility through speech recognition

The average typing speed is around 40 words per minute. But for people with disabilities, this number is often lower, making writing tasks and admin work slower, more frustrating, and even painful.

Speaking, on the other hand, is often much faster. The average speaking speed is 130 words per minute—more than three times faster than typing.

With Dragon Professional Anywhere, people can use intuitive speech-to-text to dictate their thoughts directly into documents, forms, email clients, admin systems, and more. As well as helping to complete writing tasks, speech recognition allows users to navigate apps quickly with voice commands.

Working using voice isn't just a faster way to complete tasks. Crucially for employees with disabilities, it also reduces the reliance on mouse and keyboard, and helps them sidestep some of the barriers that can make work difficult. For example, a user with dyslexia may find it easier to explain their thoughts verbally, with speech-to-text taking care of transcribing their words as clear written text.

Speech recognition can even help prevent employees developing long-term health conditions such as repetitive strain injuries or carpal tunnel, by reducing the amount of typing and mouse navigation that employees need to do.

Dragon Professional Anywhere gives users high accuracy from day one—up to 99% recognition success—but we understand that everyone speaks differently and has different accessibility needs. Using natural language processing and AI, Dragon dynamically adapts to users' individual pronunciations, speech patterns, and preferred vocabulary, boosting the accuracy and making it even simpler to use.

Its dictionary is fully customisable, which makes it easy to tailor to every kind of role and industry—it can even recognise complex technical, legal, and medical terminology. There are also tools to create verbal shortcuts, helping users take advantage of spoken acronyms that automatically translate into full typed phrases, and add signatures or boilerplate text with a single command.

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When film director Neil Mcenery-West developed a repetitive strain injury, he used Dragon Professional Anywhere to cut down his reliance on the keyboard during his work for a London thinktank, helping him reduce discomfort.
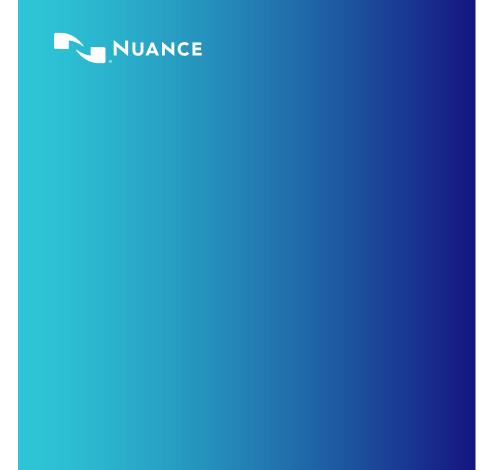
— Listen to Neil's story

Years of focus, centred on accessibility

Dragon Professional Anywhere is backed by our latest speech recognition engine, built on decades of research and development into how people speak and how that should translate into intuitive processes—for everyone.

Dragon is a professional-grade tool, but it's not just about productivity. We work closely with the British Disability Forum and the British Assistive Technology Association to ensure we're delivering a solution that helps all people work to the best of their ability, in ways that suit their needs.

Accessibility is essential for getting the most out of your people, keeping them happy, and expanding your team with the right talent. And providing the right technology options can be a simple but very effective way to open up your organisation to everyone.

To learn more about Dragon Professional Anywhere, and how it could help your employees work more comfortably and efficiently, get in touch with our experts today.