Access Ready Business

When the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in 1990, the Internet as we know it today did not exist as the ubiquitous marketplace for information, goods and services. Neither did the information and communications technology-driven workplace.

Today, the ADA's promise that individuals with disabilities will be able to participate in all aspects of American civic and economic life largely depends on whether or not today's technologically advanced society allows for it.

Businesses need to understand that their success, as well as their legal obligations, depend on their information and communications technology systems being accessible.

Today the Internet and information and communications technology (ICT) play a critical role in the daily personal, professional and

business life of Americans. More and more, the Internet and ICT are central to the workplace and to how business does business.

Access Ready INC. is an independent, non-profit, cross-disability education and advocacy organization promoting a policy of inclusion and accessibility of information and communications technology (ICT). Access Ready's strategies include technical findings, policy discussions, best practices, and advocacy efforts made available to the public through www.accessready.org, its social media stream, and other public relations efforts.

Access Ready asks the question, "If physical facilities in this country must be built in accordance with accessibility standards, why not information and communications technology?" Businesses, employers, and federal, state, and local governments are becoming increasingly dependent on information and communications technology to provide goods and services. For people with

disabilities, accessible information and communications technology is a necessity, not a luxury or a convenience, which fosters independence, economic self-sufficiency, and active, meaningful participation in civic life.

What is an Access Ready Environment?

An access Ready Environment is where access for people with disabilities at the physical and technological levels is a matter of forethought, design, inclusion and planning instead of a condition of afterthought, delay and discrimination resulting in risk to all concerned.

Increasingly, many businesses covered under Title III of the (ADA) are using websites to market themselves and to provide direct access to their goods, services, and activities. To support these activities the internal or employee facing operations of business are also driven by ICT. Without addressing the

accessibility of both their internal and external ICT, businesses risk losing out on the approximately 20% of American customers and employees who have disabilities.

An Access Ready policy advances accessibility across the web and information and communications technology.

Many business websites and other ICT are difficult or impossible for individuals with disabilities to use because the technology does not interface with the adaptive technology used by people with disabilities. Being unable to access websites and information and communications technology puts individuals with disabilities at a great disadvantage in today's society and starves businesses of potential customers and potential workers.

Like curb ramps to sidewalks, building bridges between the standard ICT and the assistive technology used by people with disabilities is accomplishable and necessary to allow people

with disabilities to access the systems that are foundational to our workplaces and civic spaces. Also, like curb ramps, these bridges benefit everyone - with and without disabilities. And including accessibility features, like including curb ramps, from the beginning means they are affordable and seamless.

Accessibility across ICT is no longer rocket science, ICT must simply be required of the developers and marketers of these products and services.

Businesses that embrace an Access Ready policy can accomplish this over reasonable budget cycles without real difficulty.

For many, it is now difficult to imagine a world without the unprecedented access to information that the web provides. Businesses large and small are increasingly providing customers access to goods and services through their websites. Electronic commerce, or "e-commerce," often offers consumers a wider

selection and lower prices than traditional "brick-and-mortar" storefronts. For individuals with disabilities who experience barriers to their ability to travel, the Internet may be their only way to access certain goods and services. The availability of these services online not only makes life easier for customers but allows businesses to operate more efficiently and cost-effectively, as ICT reduces the overhead costs of retail locations and on-site sales staff. For Businesses to ignore people with disabilities as a market for goods and services is a tremendous mistake. This minority now represents twenty-five percent of the general population according to the Centers for Disease Control. The disability community represents three hundred billion dollars plus a year in disposable income.

Further, why would it be acceptable not to provide access to online goods and services to people with disabilities? No other minority would stand for such limitations and society

would not allow such a thing. It is a fact that the Internet is dramatically changing the way that businesses serve their customers.

The recent COVID pandemic brought this home to millions in very stark ways. When we were all told to go home to live, work, learn, teach and shop many people with disabilities found the inaccessibility of websites and other ICT based services severely limited their abilities.

More and more customers with disabilities are asserting their rights to access through litigation. By adopting an Access Ready policy business can achieve and maintain accessibility on the web and through their ICT.

People with disabilities also represent a vast untapped talent pool ready to join the workforce. Accessible internal and back-office ICT opens up many employment opportunities. Given the competition for good employees in today's economy, the availability of qualified unemployed and underemployed workers with

disabilities, the supportive services and accommodations offered by state and federal taxpayer funded programs, such as Vocational Rehabilitation, and the tax and business incentives in place for employing people with disabilities, it is foolish for business not to seek out qualified individuals with disabilities.

Again, the COVID pandemic has pushed forward the need for employees who can and want to work from home. This is a perfect scenario for workers with disabilities in this employee deprived recruitment environment.

Making internal and external ICT accessible is the foundation that makes it possible for companies to increase their customer base and their employee pool.

What is needed is the adoption of an Access Ready policy that applies to ICT across the economy. An Access Ready policy establishes a commitment, a framework, and clear roadmap to achieving accessibility, increasing

customers, and improving employee skill and productivity, as well as fulfilling legal civil rights obligations.

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