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Feature

Title: Creating a more accessible workplace

Standfirst: Microsoft's Jenny Lay-Flurrie explains how organisations can use technologies such as AI, as well as insights from people with disabilities, to create more accessible and supportive workplaces for every individual

By Amber Hickman

Disability is part of being human, according to the World Health Organization. An estimated 1.3 billion people – about 16 per cent of the global population – currently lives with significant disability, including hearing or visual impairments, mobility issues, limb differences, neurodivergence, or chronic health conditions.

However, only 27 per cent of people with disabilities are currently employed globally, according to the United Nation's *Disability and Development Report 2024*. This can be attributed to multiple reasons: a lack in affordable and effective assistive technology, a shortage of support networks for people with disabilities or an absence of training for workplace inclusivity and accommodations.

According to Jenny Lay-Flurrie, chief accessibility officer at Microsoft, these hurdles have existed for decades.

"There are a multitude of factors that lower the ceiling of what is possible for people with disabilities," she says. "This can prevent individuals from bringing their full, authentic selves to the workplace or pursuing their desired opportunities, whether that's a new job or a promotion, because they're worried about their capabilities or the support they may receive."

Lay-Flurrie, who is deaf and disabled herself, believes embracing accessibility and supporting disabled employees is a "no brainer", and can only benefit an organisation.

“When you do have a key foundation of inclusivity in place and can support disabled people across the spectrum, it changes everything,” she explains. “What we’ve found at Microsoft is that when we empower people with disabilities, it leads to innovation.”

In 2015 Microsoft launched the Neurodiversity Program, which offers neurodivergent people the opportunity to apply for a career at Microsoft and showcase their skills in an environment that accommodates their needs, while maintaining equal hiring assessment standards for every candidate. It is one of several efforts to expand access to opportunity and remove barriers for neurodivergent talent.

“One of the biggest things we learned about setting people up for success is that it all comes down to doing the simple things well,” says Lay-Flurrie. “For instance, if you’re holding a meeting, you should make sure there’s an agenda, meeting notes and clear expectations for every participant. This doesn’t just benefit people with disabilities, it benefits everyone.”

Learning about accessibility and inclusivity is an ongoing journey and new perspectives emerge continually. Microsoft, for example, has already been on this journey for 30 years and is continually adapting and improving its own operations and policies.

According to Lay-Flurrie, Microsoft’s journey can be divided into “three key chapters”, starting with the creation of its dedicated accessibility team in 1995.

This chapter was focused on creating technology to empower users with additional needs. The launch of Windows 95 was a major step in the right direction, with features for blind and low vision users, those that are deaf or hard-of hearing and even neurodiverse people. Many of these features still exist today, such as Sticky Keys which was designed to help individuals with low mobility press multiple keys simultaneously.

The second chapter of Microsoft’s accessibility and inclusivity journey started in 2015. “This was when we began to more carefully weave people into the process,”

says Lay-Flurrie. “So instead of thinking about accessibility as an engineering discipline, we thought about it as an ecosystem.

“I was chair of the employee disability group at Microsoft by this point, so I could see the talent and expertise right in front of me and how that could be woven into the engineering process.”

Thanks to this shift, the insights of employees and customers are now methodically integrated into how Microsoft develops its products and accessibility policies, and it has become a cultural practice with every employee requiring mandatory accessibility training.

The third, and current, chapter of Microsoft’s accessibility journey is centred around exploring the potential of AI. One of Microsoft’s first major uses of AI for accessibility was to provide descriptive AI, and create the Seeing AI app.

The app was developed in 2017 as part of a hackathon project and now supports blind and low vision individuals around the world with day-to-day tasks such as reading mail, identifying products and describing images using the camera on their mobile devices.

Over the past couple of years, Microsoft’s rapid advancements in AI have been used to improve Seeing AI with more accurate image descriptions, the ability to identify personal objects and generate audio descriptions of moving images. The app also features an Ask Seeing AI chatbot, which allows users to ask questions about the object in view, such as items on a menu.

Generative AI, and Microsoft Copilot in particular, has also had a significant impact on accessibility in the workplace. For example, Copilot in Microsoft Teams is helping deaf and neurodivergent individuals by generating meeting notes and feedback, while Microsoft 365 Copilot is supporting people with daily tasks and workload.

“There are people on my team with muscular dystrophy who tell me they can now create a Microsoft PowerPoint deck in just three clicks, which is helping to reduce their workload and saving them valuable energy,” says Lay-Flurrie.

During Microsoft's Ability Summit 2025, viewers saw real-life examples of how Copilot is helping people work across different industries and roles. For example, Cat Susch, principal technical architect at Microsoft, outlined how she uses Copilot with her hearing aids in Microsoft Teams to generate transcripts quickly to save time. Meanwhile, Dylan Valic, lead marketing director at Spectrum Designs, spoke about how 65 per cent of the organisation's 77 employees are autistic and explained how Copilot helps him to manage different tasks and keep up with the pace of the day.

The assistive power of AI is also being seen with agentic AI, one of the newest tools to spark enterprise transformation. For Lay-Flurrie, joining a Teams call is a multi-click process to ensure that live captioning is turned on, her interpreter is in the right place and her meeting notes are in view. Using an AI agent can reduce this to a single press of a button, saving not only time, but energy too.

At the end of 2024, EY and Microsoft shared the results of a collaborative study that explored the impact of Microsoft 365 Copilot for neurodiverse individuals and people

with disabilities in the workplace. The study involved over 300 employees that identify as neurodivergent or disabled from 17 organisations across seven sectors.

The results highlighted that Copilot was having a positive impact, with 91 per cent of respondents considering the tool as a helpful assistive technology. In addition, 85 per cent said Copilot has the potential to create a more accessible workplace and 76 per cent reported using the tool to help them thrive at work.

“We’re now seeing companies start to allocate Copilot as an assistive technology and prioritising disabled employees when distributing licences,” says Lay-Flurrie. “It’s fascinating to see because designating something as an assistive technology is a multiyear process, and many technologies undergo massive amounts of development to reach that point. The fact that Copilot has already reached that status speaks volumes.”

When identifying different accessibility use cases it is important for organisations to keep in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to disability, so the accommodations needed will vary from person to person.

Driving progress in accessibility therefore requires collaboration. Microsoft integrates it into the development process for each product, website and tool it creates.

“Regulation is not the goal, because the evolution of technology is moving quicker than that, and so it is important to have the right communities working with us on advisory boards and design sprints,” says Lay-Flurrie, who gets most feedback from the Disability Answer Desk, which is where individuals can get assistance with accessibility in products across the Microsoft ecosystem.

“Once a product is out in the world, I get over one thousand calls a month from people asking for help, providing feedback and suggesting new features,” she says. “It’s a methodical process where we embed the insights of disabled people throughout. The goal is to simply deliver breakthrough, accessible experiences that empower everyone.”

Microsoft also collaborates with its partner ecosystem to develop products and share knowledge or research. For example, when Microsoft created the Neurodiversity Program in 2015, it did so with the help of SAP, who came to the Microsoft campus and shared the knowledge it gained from launching its own Autism at Work programme in 2012.

In 2017, Microsoft, SAP, EY and JPMorgan Chase collaborated to create the Neurodiversity @ Work Employer Roundtable. The roundtable now includes over 50 employers across 10 industries that are committed to sharing best practices and learnings to provide more opportunities for neurodivergent employees. There are also a variety of partners developing their own products and solutions that can integrate with the Microsoft ecosystem.

For instance, Tobii Dynavox provides communication solutions for people with cerebral palsy, autism, or any other condition that can cause a communication disability. The organisation has worked with Microsoft for several years, and its TD I-Series is an eye controlled communication solution built on the Windows platform. The solution also comes with TD Control, which allows users to control their computer using eye tracking and interact with emails, websites and applications naturally.

Tobii Dynavox has also worked with Microsoft to integrate Microsoft Neural Voice, which is part of Azure AI Speech, into its solutions. This will provide people using its assistive communication devices with more personal speech options.

“It’s very important that we have this open ecosystem and that there are always third-party options available as they can often build on our existing offerings and design for more specific use cases,” says Lay-Flurrie. “My team at Microsoft is very disability diverse, and the technology we use is vast and varied as everyone comes in with the solutions that works for them.”

Developing accessible technology is only one piece of the puzzle, however. There are several other factors involved in creating a welcoming working environment for disabled people.

Firstly, it is important the organisations developing this technology ensure it is affordable, easily available and fits in with the surrounding environment.

“To be disabled is to be human,” says Lay Flurrie. “People should be able to sit next to their peer and use a device that meets their needs, blends in with the technology around them and doesn’t make them feel othered.”

Secondly, creating an environment where people are trained on inclusivity and provided with the right knowledge, language and etiquette is vital.

“People should feel comfortable to ask for what they need wherever they are in their work career,” says Lay-Flurrie. “Employers should be able to listen, engage with and support their employees and do what they can to accommodate an individual’s needs. They shouldn’t be waiting around for the vital tools they need to be successful.”

The long-term vision for Microsoft is to ultimately shift accessibility to the left and build inclusivity into product design from the moment development begins.

“When designing a building nowadays, it’s become standard to include features such as ramps, elevators, hearing loop systems and braille signage from the very beginning,” says Lay-Flurrie. “Likewise, I want every piece of technology to be accessible from the get-go. “AI really is the catalyst here and it’s going to speed up development and help us to create a world where everything we build is accessible by design. This will not just meet the needs of disabled people but will create innovation for the world. We want to empower every person and every organisation to achieve more, and accessibility is at the core of that.”

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