

USABILITY AND DISABILITIES

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During the past ten years I have been working with public libraries in Massachusetts and California to ensure that technology is accessible by people with disabilities. As you all know, technology -- and especially the Web -- have opened up resources to all kinds of people who do not use traditional library materials in traditional ways. Libraries have been excited by providing services “without walls” and many have been quick to purchase the latest in computer technology. In both MA and CA, as in many other states, federal funds had been granted to dozens of libraries to purchase adaptive (originally called assistive) equipment such as screen magnifiers, screen enlargement software, alternative screens, alternative mice, adjustable height tables, and reading machines (computers that scan print materials and use speech software to read the material aloud). Both State Libraries decided to evaluate that use of grant funds. I was hired to do the assessments which revealed that nearly all such equipment was underused, unused, readapted for another use in the library, even stored in closets. I was told that patrons with disabilities didn’t know how to use it or wouldn’t use it. Over and over again I was told that obtaining technology had made little if any difference in the numbers of people with disabilities that the library served. More than that, library directors and staff were frustrated and annoyed that their good intentions had led nowhere. “Why did we buy these dust catchers?” I was asked. And “why tie up perfectly good computer stations that others could use?”

I was forced to confront the obvious: computer technology – even when tested for accessibility and usability -- is not a miracle solution. It isn’t even a good solution *unless* it is:

- provided by informed and comfortable staff who can provide assistance
- selected with user input
- promoted to the disability community
- accompanied by training for the user

Attitudes Are the Real Disability

As disability rights advocates say “attitudes are the real disability.” I have interviewed people with disabilities in many states and they rate staff attitude and knowledge as the single most important factor in their repeat use of the library. They may come once for a tour or demonstration, but their continued use of the library – and its new technology – depends on staff. As clear as this message was from people with disabilities, so was the lack of understanding and knowledge most library staff members have about disabilities.

Typical questions from staff demonstrating their ignorance are:

- If she can drive a car, why does she need screen magnification?

- Why can't we pet his seeing eye dog?
- Why did that man in a wheelchair take offense when I pushed him down the aisle?
- How do I get the attention of someone who's deaf?
- Why are the deaf kids so noisy?

As we know from working with immigrants, people of color, and patrons who speak something other than English as their primary language, ignorance breeds prejudice and reluctance to interact with others. For example, library staff have told me:

- I don't like assisting blind people because I don't want strangers touching me.
- I've told him the same thing over and over; why doesn't he just pay attention the first time?
- I can't understand a thing she says. I've tried but it's not my fault; she doesn't enunciate clearly.

When asked to rate themselves on the comfort level in serving people with disabilities, the great majority of library staff members inevitably refer to themselves as "uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable."

Library staff must be given the chance to reduce their own anxiety and increase their knowledge about disabilities before serving people with disabilities. The primary methods to accomplish this are training and opportunities to interact with people with disabilities in a comfortable context.

Training. My own view is that there are three necessary levels of staff training, and that it is best to begin with disability awareness. In my opinion, until people are sincerely interested they won't learn (about disabilities or anything else). And what are people most interested in? Themselves. So I start disability awareness with "sensitivity training" by focusing on the personal through simulation exercises that allow non-disabled people to have a brief, artificial and eye-opening experience of being disabled.

The next component of disability awareness is *hearing from people with disabilities themselves*. I cannot stress this enough: by asking people with disabilities to speak about disabilities, to share their experiences using libraries and other public spaces, staff not only benefit from the expertise but have the opportunity – sometimes their first – to see diverse communication techniques (e.g. sign language, a communications board, or real-time captioning) and to interact with people with disabilities in a context that invites their questions.

Besides learning basic information about various disabilities, staff members begin to see the differences within a disability. I've been struck by how often library staff see any one group of people with disabilities as monolithic. For example, blind people are seen as one group of people whose most pertinent attribute is blindness. But people who are blind may be of any age, gender, race, educational status, etc. Besides these factors, the age of onset of blindness is significant in that it is usually a predictor of Braille literacy and electronic and computer comfort. In other words, older adults who have lost vision as a result of disease or aging rarely join blind organizations, read Braille, or use equipment especially designed for the blind. If they have used

a computer before becoming blind, they may be comfortable with adapted computers; otherwise they probably will not be. Instead older blind adults usually prefer other types of assistance from the library such as books on cassette, and often consider safe and easy parking essential because they are driven to the library by friends or family. A 35 year old person who was born blind and educated at a blind school, however, has a very different library profile. She considers access to public transportation to be essential because she is independently mobile. Evening and weekend hours are important because she works. She probably reads Braille – and may prefer it – and is comfortable with adapted equipment because she uses it at home and/or at work.

By grasping these kinds of distinctions, staff can come to see that services and programs must be planned differently for newly blind older adults and for young working people who were born blind. This is only one example of course – dissimilarities are equally pronounced among people with other disabilities.

The second training level should be on customer service techniques for serving patrons with disabilities and on the requirements of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) law as it relates to libraries. Only then do I go on to the third level: training on the equipment or technology itself. I'll talk about that training in a minute.

Nothing About Me Without Me

Another disability rights slogan – borrowed from the civil rights movement – is “Nothing about me without me.” I completely agree that inclusion is a fundamental right. People with disabilities *must* be involved in the decision-making, problem solving, and promotion around new technologies. Clearly, people with disabilities have the most expertise in what their needs are. Yet most libraries design services for people with disabilities without consulting them. Instead libraries are using only their own good intentions and vendor information to make decisions. Can you imagine that in 2003 white librarians would design programs for ethnic minority patrons without their input?

In 1999, I developed a planning process for MA libraries that wanted to design services and purchase accessible equipment for people with disabilities. The most radical notion in the process is that it must be inclusive. During the process many people with disabilities are interviewed or surveyed and some are invited to serve on a library advisory (or accessibility) committee. Twenty-five libraries of all types have used the process, convened advisory committees of people with disabilities, and collaborated with other agencies serving people with disabilities.¹ As I'd hoped, the results are services that are indeed being well-used. In 2001 the American Library Association published a version of that process² and now in California we are testing still another variation of the process with thirty-one public libraries.

¹ Quezada, Shelley. “Nothing About Me Without Me: Planning for Services for People with Disabilities.” *Public Libraries* 42 (1): 42-46, January/ February 2003.

² Rubin, Rhea Joyce. *Planning for Library Services to People with Disabilities*. Chicago: Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association, 2001.

The California State Library is helping the participating libraries not only by teaching them the inclusive planning process and by providing them with grants funds to initiate a new service, but by insisting that each library take a team approach. So training is provided to one library administrator and one disabilities representative as well as to the direct service librarian. We are hoping that, because of the involvement of people with disabilities, the planning will be better and the service more realistic than previous grant-funded projects have been. And, because of the inclusion of a library administrator, the service will be better-supported and longer lasting.

In addition to ensuring that the best and most appropriate technology is purchased, including people with disabilities simplifies and enhances the promotion of the new library service. Many libraries adhere to the “Field of Dreams” philosophy: “If you build it, they will come.” Needless to say, that is not the case. A study in 1995³ found that only 11% of public libraries that had purchased adaptive equipment reported a resultant increased library use by people with disabilities. Inadequate use reflects poor promotion, which in turn reflects a lack of understanding about the disability community.

Most librarians are not cognizant of the channels of communication within groups of people with disabilities. They are unaware that:

- most blind people get their primary information from radio, recorded message lines provided by agencies and organizations, and from alternative format newspapers
- most deaf people get their primary information from word of mouth, deaf community newspapers, and captioned TV programs
- computer-using people who are blind or deaf frequently use computer bulletin boards

Most librarians are also unaware that to reach people with disabilities they may have to explain the library itself. Many people with disabilities, especially those born blind or born deaf, have little experience of the library and no expectations of it. As one blind library patron told me “The library is culturally foreign to the congenitally blind.”

The library’s accessibility advisory committee can assist the library in promoting services appropriately through popular local channels. For example, instead of hanging print posters in the library to advertise the availability of new technology for people who are blind or have visual impairments, well-informed libraries are promoting the new technology on television, radio, and electronic bulletin boards, and through the recorded newsletters and recorded message lines of local organizations of people who may use it. Advisory committee members and users of the service are spreading the word through their own formal and informal networks.

You Want the Computer to Do What?

Earlier I promised to return to the topic of training on the adaptive equipment or technology. Two types of technical training are needed: for staff and for patrons.

³ Rubin, Rhea Joyce. *Lessons Learned: ADA Compliance in California’s Public Libraries*. Sacramento: California State Library, 1995.

First, staff need to know how to use the technology. I know this sounds elementary but in most libraries only one staff member is able to use the adaptive equipment or special software, and often not well. Technology training – as we know from OPAC and Internet training -- is difficult in that people need to use the skill independently, repeatedly, and often to keep a skill level high. But if they are rarely asked to use the equipment, staff develop “learning atrophy” and must demonstrate “red faced” as one librarian explained it to me. Libraries should train a number of staff so that at least one staff member familiar with the technology is on duty whenever the library is open. Then those staff members should be given ample opportunity to use it so that they are comfortable with requests for assistance.

Next is patron training. One of the most commonly cited obstacles to providing excellent library service to people with disabilities is the amount of training time needed for a patron to be able to use a piece of equipment independently. For reading machines, for example, estimates of training time range from 10 minutes to 3 hours depending mainly on the philosophy of training. Some libraries set up the machine for basic use and instruct the patron only in the use of essential keys. Then, if the patron needs more functions (e.g. change in speed) the staff provides assistance. This approach is akin to covering some of the buttons on the photocopier machine allowing patrons to select only the size of paper and the number of copies; if a patron want double-sided copies, for example, staff is called. The idea is that the great majority of photocopier users want only single copies on standard size paper and the great majority of reading machine users want the “Perfect Paul” voice at average speed reading single pages.

Some libraries, however, take a different tack and teach patrons about all functions of the reading (or photocopy) machines. These libraries feel that to do less is condescending. Also that by requiring more sophisticated users to ask for staff help, the library is undermining the aim of the ADA (and of adaptive technology) which is to make people with disabilities independent. This issue is underlined with libraries who hesitate to do any training, saying that “there is no net savings of time” in teaching a patron to use an adapted OPAC or a web page reader because it’s faster for staff to just look up their requests on the staff OPAC or read aloud a standard webpage.

Another issue with patron training is that much adaptive equipment assumes familiarity with the basic technology. For example, most adapted OPACs assume patron familiarity with both card catalogs and computer screens. In teaching patrons, especially older patrons who may not be computer literate, staff must spend more time than may have expected teaching the basics.

Conclusion

In conclusion I will summarize my main points.

Usable and accessible technology is not enough. In order to ensure that the technology is really *used* by people with disabilities, libraries must:

- work on staff attitudes and knowledge
- involve people with disabilities in planning and implementation
- provide sufficient technical training to staff and patrons

- promote the technology appropriately

Questions or comments? Contact Rhea Joyce Rubin at 510-339-1274 or through her website www.rheajoycerubin.org