



Making accessibility
an imperative

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Foreword

Stephie Elms, head of disability equity and neuroinclusion at Novartis International, says her current role is “the most engaging, inspiring and sometimes overwhelming job of my career”.

Privilege and bias. These are the two factors that consistently arise when one initiates a conversation around accessibility.

For people with disabilities, privilege mostly transpires as ableism, the notion that a person cannot perform a task or be a contributor to societal or economic goals due to their disability.

There is also a leading perception that disabilities are easily identified, discounting the 80% of disabilities that we know to be non-apparent. It's frustrating to hear “I haven't seen anyone in a wheelchair” on such a frequent basis.

I believe that in a corporate environment, we have the mandate to challenge this narrative, and it makes good business sense to do so.

It is no surprise that many people with non-apparent disabilities or neurodivergent people decide not to disclose their personal circumstances to employers or colleagues, choosing instead to struggle in workplaces that simply do not allow them to perform at their best.

Performance is, of course, a benefit for the employer. Benefits for the disabled or neurodivergent employee include a sense of inclusion, belonging and self-esteem.



As a transgender woman, coming out at work was not an easy decision to take. However, I could benefit from great support from Novartis and our LGBTQI+ community. Now I truly feel that I belong in the organisation as a visible transgender leader.

The parallels with disability and neuroinclusion are not lost on me, anchoring my work around inclusion and belonging for all our 75,000-plus employees.

Novartis is a focused medicines business, headquartered in Basel, Switzerland. We operate in over 140 countries, in countless locations. With

research, development, manufacturing, sales and support functions, our diverse operating environments present equally diverse accessibility challenges.

As many corporates, we historically focused our DEI efforts on gender equity. However, in 2022 we restructured our global DEI function to drive DEI efforts across many, what we call, equity pillars. One of these pillars is disability, with the addition of neuroinclusion coming in 2024.

As I write this, I have been “in role” for a little over two years. By education I am a pharmaceutical scientist and have spent my entire adult life working at Novartis, with two previous careers in manufacturing compliance and, latterly, IT.

I started out in the UK and have had the opportunity to live and work in Germany, Singapore and Switzerland. Now I am on what I call “career 3.0” heading up our disability and neuroinclusion efforts globally. I can honestly say that from over three decades at Novartis, my current role is the most engaging, inspiring and, sometimes, overwhelming job of my career.

Coming into the role, I quickly realised how little I knew and how my opinions had been, unfortunately, informed by my innate biases and privileges.

It's never too late in life for some introspection and self-awareness! Fortunately, we had some well-established disability Employee Resource Groups at Novartis, who have been incredibly supportive in highlighting those topics that needed attention.

Coupled with wonderful partners at organisations like the Business Disability Forum, Purple Space, Valuable 500

and the ILO GBDN, I was able to take in the complexity and develop a focused roadmap for change.

It is important to realise that disability equity is not a competitive sport; practitioners across companies, sectors, NGOs and consultants are keen to share and move the needle together. Indeed, some of Novartis' fiercest competitors are incredibly open to discuss accessibility. We are still early on our accessibility journey at Novartis. However, disability equity and neuroinclusion are now well established within DEI globally and sponsored by C-Suite leaders.

We established a five-year strategic roadmap and accessibility, both physical and digital, are central themes. People are openly talking about disability at senior levels in the company, momentum is building.

Specifically for physical accessibility, we have a great partnership with our global real estate team, and we are jointly developing workplace guidance, incorporating universal design principles and the learnings from some independent accessibility inspections performed in our Basel campus.

In conclusion, improving accessibility for all is an imperative. We should not underestimate the complexity of varying international regulations and the broad spectra of disability. Designing workplaces that respect that every person is an individual is a paradigm shift that needs to be made by many and a large step for many.

My advice is to stay open minded, be humble, be prepared to repeat your messages daily and, most importantly, engage with your disabled employees with respect and empathy, truly living “nothing about us, without us”.



Ian Streets, Managing Director at About Access

We are grateful to Stephie Elms for sharing her experiences and thoughts on accessibility as head of disability equity and neuroinclusion at Novartis International.

Stephie's foreword demonstrates that accessibility is a global issue, and that fixing the problems requires a united approach supported with the right mindset. Stephie notes that disability equity is not a competitive sport; however, it is clear that a business which is not accessible will almost certainly lose out to others which are.

Please don't think that accessibility is only affordable for big organisations. In the simplest terms, if a wheelchair user and five companions are picking out a small, independent restaurant for lunch are they going to choose the one with three steps leading to the entrance, or the place a few doors away which offers an accessible alternative?

Case study **On the right track?**

Looking back over our 25 years in business, it's clear that accessibility has improved but it's questionable whether enough progress has been made. To adopt a rail analogy, in keeping with some of the customer horror stories in the media, we're on the right track but there are still times when accessibility is shunted into the sidings.



One milestone came in 2010 when the Equality Act replaced the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) across the UK with the exception of Northern Ireland. It's a matter of concern then to see some property, planning and design professionals still refer to the DDA in their documents. If they don't even know the title of the legislation, how can they be familiar with its requirements?

Going back even further, it was back in 2000, the year in which About Access was founded, that the Paralympian Tanni Grey-Thompson came third in the Sports Personality of the Year awards but a failure by BBC bosses to provide a ramp meant that she could not access the stage to accept her prize.

Fast-forward to 2024, and Lady Grey-Thompson had to crawl off a train arriving at London's King's Cross. The 11-time Paralympic gold medallist told BBC Radio 4's Today programme she had initially booked assistance to help her off her train from Leeds but missed it and instead travelled on a later service. There should still have been someone available to help her but, after waiting for 20 minutes, no one arrived so she had to try to disembark herself.

One area where there has been considerable progress is with the ability of people to tell the world about any failings in accessibility policies and practices. The ever-increasing reach of the media industry, and especially social media, means an organisation can be embarrassed in front of an audience of millions in a heartbeat.

However, the media can be your friend if you do things properly, and it has become more willing to promote inclusivity. After becoming the first blind contestant to win Strictly Come Dancing, the comedian Chris McCausland was invited to deliver the alternative Christmas message on Channel 4. He used the platform to call for an end to discrimination against disabled people. So as you work to make your business accessible, you should also make sure you use your website and your social media output to let people know about it – including customers and competitors.

About Access: **about us**

We've been going for 25 years – a quarter of a century – and it's now just over 10 years since we produced our first ebook.

Obviously, a main aim of the publication is to promote our business and show potential clients what we can do for them, but there's also more to it.

We are always eager to raise awareness among businesses and other organisations of how they can benefit by making their premises, products and services accessible.

And it's not just about attracting more customers. At a time when so many employers are voicing concerns about skills shortages, it's astonishing that some still cut themselves off from a wider talent pool by not making workplaces accessible.

If our messages alone are enough to inspire the decision-makers in these organisations to remedy any failings around accessibility then that's good for everybody. But if they need additional advice, assessments and analysis then we can provide it to help our clients improve their organisations, keep on the right side of the law and generally do the right thing.

Avoid the worst case by adopting best practice

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What's the worst that could happen if you fail to make your organisation accessible? Well, you could face legal action for breaching the Equality Act 2010, with significant financial costs and reputational damage.

How can you avoid it? By anticipating problems before they arise, by acting early to identify and resolve any issues, and by adopting best practice.

At About Access, we explore, measure and analyse every scenario to help you do that. Our access audits and access consultancy will look at what you are doing and highlight any areas of concern.

It may be that one of our access statements will meet your needs by advising people of any obstacles they may encounter on visiting your premises and helping them to make an informed choice.

If any remedial work is required, we can help with our design appraisals, looking at a planned development – ideally as part of your design team – and ensuring that inclusive design is achieved throughout the construction process.

We also support clients with their strategic planning, maybe exploring the potential accessibility issues across a portfolio of sites. Different properties and locations often present contrasting challenges, and we work to help you achieve consistency. If you get the strategy right from the start, everything else should fall into place.



We also provide training to help our clients improve their awareness of how and where accessibility issues can arise, and to share that knowledge among colleagues.

Investing in such expertise makes it more likely that you will avoid problems with accessibility issues. It also puts you in a stronger position to defend any discrimination claims that may arise. The key is to anticipate problems before they happen and to seek advice from professional access consultants rather than cold callers. If you make sure you understand the routes people take in and around your premises, you'll be able to ensure a smoother journey for your customers and colleagues.

Case study

The customer journey

We talk a lot about the customer journey, and that's because anticipating a person's route through the built environment is the best way to identify any obstacles that might prevent them from getting where they want to be.

Try working your way around using your elbow or a clenched fist rather than open hands and flexible fingers. You'll get an idea soon enough of whether office doors can be opened, toilet doors locked and lights turned on and off by someone who has difficulties with manual dexterity. You'll be surprised by how many obstacles you encounter along the way.



Non-disabled people will not necessarily recognise the features which make the built environment inaccessible to others, whether indoors or outdoors, on foot or in a vehicle. Also, someone who has a particular type of impairment, such as mobility, will not necessarily understand the accessibility needs of someone who has a different condition, for example visual impairment.

In following the customer journey, you should therefore apply a pan-disability perspective. If you don't get it right, you risk ending up with something else that we discuss a lot – an island of accessibility in a sea of inaccessibility.

We've assessed all sorts of buildings and estates, and the same principles apply whether the premises are used for work, rest or play.

A good starting point is the car park. If there is one, how is it accessed? Is there a barrier and do you have to use a proximity reader? Is it easy for people to operate if they only have one arm or are short in stature?

Does it have accessible parking bays – including EV charging points? How do

you get from them to the entrance to the building? How accessible is the route for people arriving by public transport?

Does the reception desk meet the needs of someone – whether staff or a visitor – who uses a wheelchair or is short of stature? Are the loos and lifts accessible? In moving around the building, will people find that doors and corridors are wide enough for wheelchairs and other mobility aids? Are handrails the right height and design? Guesstimates aren't good enough. There are minimum measurements for all of these facilities.

It's important to note that employees are likely to have to make multiple shorter journeys to the loo, meeting rooms, rest and refreshment areas. How accessible are those facilities? Can people reach the things they need to make a drink? If there's a drinks machine, does it have a touchscreen?

These are micro-journeys that people encounter during their working day. It's essential that they are identified and understood, and it's equally important to consider the return journeys, because a door which is accessible in one direction might present an obstacle on the way back.

Global growth bringing greater demand

The Novartis example shows how accessibility has developed into a business priority worldwide, and that's certainly been our experience as we have seen an increase in commissions from global operators.

We're also operating in a wider range of sectors. For example, as the media features growing numbers of disabled people in its output, we've worked behind the scenes to advise broadcasters on accessibility for TV game shows.

Whatever your sector or size, it's important to have those conversations about disability at the highest level, to cascade them through the organisation and to take in new ideas from colleagues.

If you think none of your customers or staff has an impairment, think again. You may have people with non-apparent disabilities, or neurodivergent people, who don't feel confident that they can count on your support so keep their conditions a secret.

And if your entire workforce really is made up of non-disabled people, could it be down to built-in barriers in the recruitment process? And of course, you need to look to the future, because any colleague could acquire an impairment suddenly or gradually, and you should be ready to make the reasonable adjustments that will support them in continuing to work.

With customers, the benchmark is still the Purple Pound - the annual spending power of disabled people and their companions,



which in the UK is estimated at more than £274bn. If your premises, products and services aren't accessible, you'll miss out.

There's a list below of the sort of professionals who draw on our guidance as they strive to give their clients an edge in an increasingly competitive property market.

- Architects/designers/surveyors.
- Facilities/estates managers.
- Human resources for training of staff.
- Health and safety companies who are asked for access audits and don't provide the service.

The premises are located across the UK and worldwide and have a wide range of uses including:

- Retail and shopping centres.
- Education sites.
- Ecclesiastical buildings.
- Local and national government.
- Healthcare establishments.
- Elderly care facilities.
- Hotels and resorts.
- Car park buildings.
- Airports.
- Railway stations.
- Sports stadiums.
- Housing associations.
- Travel facilities.
- Industrial sites.
- Tourism.
- Heritage.



Case studies

Office block audit exposed design errors

A lack of foresight and late consultation are two of the biggest issues when it comes to creating barriers to accessibility and we encountered both when we were asked to review an office refurbishment.

The building housed our law firm client and other tenants. We were aware of the law firm's commitment to ensure their premises in the UK and overseas are accessible so we completed an audit of the staff and visitor journey and gave feedback to the landlord about the common parts of the building and about how accessibility could be improved.

We found that the landlord had put in new changing rooms, new loos and other facilities that were not as accessible as they could have been, and changes would have to be made.

Among the issues were that the loos were too small and created difficulties for people using mobility aids. The lifts didn't have audible announcements to inform anybody using them that the doors were about to open or close, which floor the lift had arrived at or which direction it was heading.

The designers had failed to consider properly how the premises and facilities would be used. They also made it difficult for their errors to be remedied by not calling in an access consultant until the programme of work was nearly complete.

Frictionless retail fuelling frustration

We looked into the future in attending a presentation on the next retail revolution, eliminating cash and queues, freeing up time for people to do other things. But, as ever, there's another side to it because frictionless retail doesn't necessarily mean zero frustration.

You scan your card as you go into the store, you pick up your items and then you leave. No queues or conversations, but also nothing to show how assistance can be provided to customers who need it.

The concept of such a system can disadvantage all sorts of people who, for whatever reason, can only use cash. In addition, people with learning difficulties may struggle with the whole concept and find it difficult to understand that, once through the barrier, you can pick up what you like and walk out.

The operators need to anticipate possible pitfalls, counter them with effective design and good information on how to use the facilities, and back that up with face-to-face support for people who need it.

The absence of staff in the immediate area is a concern. We know from the experience of railway ticket machines that some customers will encounter issues, with their frustration being compounded by feeling apprehensive or even intimidated in what they see as a high-tech, unfamiliar environment.

The tried and tested way for overcoming such problems is to have some staff close to hand who have received disability confidence training and who can provide assistance as and when necessary.

Bringing hidden impairments into the open

The figure in our foreword indicating that 80% of disabilities are known to be non-apparent is supported by official data from the government.

There are plenty of reports that will show an increase in diagnosis of certain conditions, and there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence of increased public awareness. It's significant also that Stephanie Elms tells us that "neuroinclusion" was added to her job title during 2024.

But Stephanie also tells of her frustration on still hearing people dismiss disability issues by saying "I haven't seen anyone in a wheelchair". And most of us will be able to recall instances of people doubting the legitimacy of someone who "doesn't look disabled" using a blue badge.

Our case studies highlight one example of a big hotel chain which showed a clear lack of awareness of neuroinclusion with its choice of furnishings, and, more reassuringly, a forum that brought together employers, education and training professionals with government agencies to promote job opportunities for people with physical disabilities and special educational needs (SEND).

Delegates at that event highlighted the growing appreciation of hidden disabilities including neurodivergence, the benefits which people living with certain conditions can bring to you workforce and the measures that can be taken to make the workplace accessible to them.

Quiet spaces help because everybody needs a break, and people with invisible, cognitive conditions need quiet areas rather than just desire them.



Increasing numbers of retailers recognise that creating quiet areas within their shops can help to attract more customers including, but not limited to, people who are on the autistic spectrum and can become distracted or uncomfortable by noise and other sensory intrusions.

An even better idea for retail is to introduce periods of silence across the entire store area, the equivalent of relaxed performances at the theatre.

Surface finishes on counters, walls, floors and decorative features should also be handled with care. Some designs can be an issue for people with limited vision, as well for as people with cognitive impairments or who are neurodivergent. Patterns should not be too busy, too geometric or with clashes from strong tonal contrast.

But the solution isn't to give everybody their own office and leave them to create their own working environment. It's to provide a range of options that can meet the needs of everybody at any given time.

Case studies Employers missing out on SEND work experience

A partnership that places businesses at the heart of skills development focused at one regional forum on addressing the accessibility issues which present barriers for young people trying to get into training and work.

Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) were introduced by the government to bring together employers and training and



education providers in 38 areas around the country. One group sought informal input from us for their event aimed at tackling exclusion arising from physical disability and special educational needs (SEND).

A speaker from a company, which employs more than 500 people in activities including construction, facilities management and retail, said lack of employer engagement has been identified as a factor behind the shortage of work experience places for SEND students.

They also said that some careers teachers have to resort to cold calling businesses to even get the slightest chance of a placement for their SEND students.

But they added that their company's SEND work experience programme is structured to be inclusive, supportive and individually tailored, and designed to bridge the gap between education and employment.

Their message was that taking a SEND trainee for work experience is not as difficult as you think: "It's all about accessibility and confidence and giving people the best experience possible."

Delegates also heard from the Department of Work & Pensions and Jobcentre Plus about the importance of the Disability Confident Scheme in helping employers make the most of the talents of people with disabilities.

Dizzying visit to four-star hotel

Our stay at a four-star, 24-storey hotel left us bemused that obvious issues which should be straightforward to fix seemed to have been missed completely.

The hotel ticked a box for having ramp access to its restaurant rather than just steps, but other aspects of the design left a lot to be desired.

Operating the lifts was not easy. You started by pressing a button to indicate whether you wanted

to go up or down. Once inside, you had to hold your key card against a scanner and when a green light flashed, press the button to indicate which floor you wanted. It was easy to see how someone carrying mobility aids or with dexterity issues would struggle with scanning their key card and then quickly pressing the right button. And in our experience, the combination of card and button didn't always register.

In the main, the buttons were numbered 1 to 24 but there was also G for ground, M for mezzanine, B for the floor with a bridge to an adjacent property and also T. No idea what that stood for, but it sent you to the pool and spa in the basement. Maybe T for treatment or therapy?

Every time the lift stopped and opened, there was an announcement to say which floor you were on, but it was easy to miss these, especially if anyone in the lift was talking. You would expect to see a big number on the wall of the landing, but the only numbers visible were those on the lifts opposite, ever-changing to indicate where they were heading. If you want floor nine and the doors open to show a B and a 17, you can easily lose track of where you actually are.

An additional challenge was the landing carpet - a horror show of lines of varying thickness with black, white and assorted shades of grey bundled together. Fellow guests we spoke to found the dizzying design to be as challenging as we did.

Small steps towards sustainability

Even after 25 years of doing this job, it still seems to be something of a secret profession. If so, many people don't understand that accessibility is an issue, why should they be aware that there are professionals striving to improve it?

Our starting point, therefore, is often to enlighten a prospective client about what we do, why we do it and why they should invest. Our fees are for what happens next – the work we carry out in providing the client with a report setting out where they are in terms of accessibility, and what they might need to do.

We routinely share that initial advice and awareness through various channels, including presentations to professional

bodies and business representative organisations. Our own hallmark of quality is membership of the National Register of Access Consultants (NRAC), the only UK formal accreditation for experts in our field.

We publish articles in media outlets serving architects, designers, property professionals and other relevant sectors. Subjects might include the impact of new regulations, new interpretation of existing legislation, case studies around a scenario which highlights best practice or alternatively, where being late to fix an oversight sent a project way over-budget.

We post many of our case studies on LinkedIn because it's important that people who run businesses and other organisations are aware of how they can benefit by making their premises, products and services accessible. It's important at every stage of the business journey – expansion, recruitment, downsizing, refurbishment, relocation. It also cuts across all departments – HR, business development, marketing, facilities management, health and safety.



For more detailed guidance which can be tailored to the specific needs of an organisation, its people and premises, we have developed a programme of training courses. Our goal is to help clients take an effective approach to accessibility and build in-house sustainability.

Case studies

Gallery sees the bigger picture

An internationally renowned art gallery, adorned with all the history which comes with such status, called us in because they felt they needed to better understand the barriers to access that disabled people encounter when visiting the site.

They were focusing specifically on the requirements of members of the public rather than colleagues, and they recognised they could do that by building awareness among the staff. The aim was to develop in-house expertise to support the information gained from access audits they had already commissioned.

We provided a two-day training course for the senior leadership team. The second day took the form of a walk through the gallery to study accessibility from a pan-disability perspective. We invited the delegates to add their own input and to identify potential obstacles by drawing on their observations from the first day.

Even in surroundings where they work every day, they identified some issues which they had not been aware of before. They learned so much that they also asked us to devise a one-day course, which will become part of the induction for new starters to ensure that everyone coming into the organisation has the same perspective.

Online options increase flexibility

A consultancy that provides health and safety services to a wide range of organisations came to us for help after increasing numbers of their clients were asking for advice on accessibility. It's not quite the same sector as us, but there are areas in which we cross over.

The challenge the consultancy faced was that with new starters often joining in small numbers, it's not always practical to deliver our usual two-day course.

To help them, we developed an online course which each person undertakes and which they can complete at their own pace, fitting it in with the demands of the day job. The company can add new learners to the training programme at any time and they have direct access to me when they need it for questions or additional guidance.

It means their colleagues can complete the training in bite-sized pieces and they don't need to leave the business for two or three days at a time.

The approach is part of our portfolio of training services and the key is flexibility. With larger employers, you'd want to work with groups of people if possible to make sure everybody gets the message at the same time.

However, we're conscious that accessibility is also important to much smaller businesses employing only a handful of people, and even to sole traders, so we make sure we have a service that works for them.

About
Access



...for an inclusive world

About Access

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