

Developing accessible technology and adapted digital tools for disabled employees

Information on the case study:

Organisation: MICROSOFT FRANCE

Size: 1500

Location: France

Sector: Information Technology

Operational context

Most companies' online services and digital tools are not designed to be easily usable by disabled employees. Yet in France, a number of legal obligations require both private and public companies to ensure that all employees and users can benefit from the advantages of the digital revolution. Companies are beginning to acknowledge the importance of taking care of their digital accessibility and are keen to adapt their working tools to the needs of all their employees. Microsoft is announcing a 5-year plan to improve digital accessibility and enable better integration of people with disabilities into the world of work.

The problem

Many companies point to the cost of compliance. If we consider the scarcity of controls and penalties despite a legal framework in France that has been strengthened since 2005 (legal obligations since 2005), we understand that these factors do not encourage companies to adapt their workstations to take account of disability.

Opportunities

As Microsoft is an American company, awareness of the problem of adapting the organisation to people with disabilities is greater than in Europe or France. Microsoft demonstrates the importance of these concerns in terms of diversity and inclusion. CEO Satya Nadella himself being the father of a child with a disability has strengthened the company's focus on digital accessibility.

More generally, companies are becoming aware that being digitally accessible is good for their image and makes it easier to attract young talents.

Taking disability into account is proving to be a source of innovation, enabling the development of inclusive solutions that ultimately benefit everyone. What's more, this is a major market that companies can no longer ignore. Indeed, 6.8 million people over the age of 15 living at home report a severe limitation and 3.4 million people say they are severely restricted in their usual activities due to a health condition (Source: DREES, 2023). In 2023, 3.1 million people had administrative recognition of disability, representing 7.5% of the total population aged 15-64 (Source: INSEE, Employment Survey).

On a global level, this represents more than one billion people, or 15 to 16% of the world's population according to 2023 data from the World Bank.

What was done

1. In April 2021, Microsoft announced a 5-year plan with three priorities:

- Stimulate the development of more accessible technologies
- Making the labour market more inclusive
- Improving inclusion in the workplace

2. Developing more accessible technologies

- The [Microsoft Inclusive Tech Lab](#), where people with disabilities work with the company to develop technology and gather feedback on the already available tools.
- A variety of new “accessible by design” features and advances in Microsoft 365, enabling more than 200 million people to build, edit and share documents. A new background accessibility checker will provide a prompt to fix accessibility issues in content across the core Office apps. Outlook will nudge users to correct accessibility issues.
- GitHub, Microsoft software collaboration platform is introducing new themes designed to make its features more accessible to people with visual impairments.
- Microsoft also empowers software developers by embedding accessibility tools, prompts and AI-driven automation so that accessibility is included at the start of the development cycle.
- Microsoft is creating a new Low-Cost Assistive Technology Fund, as part of the AI for Accessibility program, to spark innovation aimed at driving down the cost of assistive digital technology and increasing access to it.

3. Making the labour market more inclusive

The development of accessible technology requires more talented individuals with disabilities. Therefore, Microsoft intensifies its focus on building a workforce that better represents people with disabilities:

- By training more people about accessibility needs and accessible design and working with [Teach Access](#). This collaboration addresses the critical need to enhance students’ understanding of digital accessibility, to support a cultural shift across the tech sector that will help create new technologies with the needs of people with disabilities in mind.
- By improving the accessibility of classrooms through a new Accessibility University Initiative to increase graduation rates of students with disabilities in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education
- By connecting skilled workers with jobs. For higher-education students, Microsoft and LinkedIn launched the [Career Coach](#) app in Microsoft Teams, powered by LinkedIn and aiming at helping increased accessibility skills. In addition, LinkedIn Coaches events

are geared toward job seekers with disabilities to help identify new employment opportunities.

4. Improving inclusion at work

The aim is to foster a welcoming and inclusive culture for people with disabilities and to attract employees with disabilities, through accessible digital and physical work environments.

- Building a sustainable culture of accessibility. In 2020, Microsoft published a [Disability Representation](#) report, disclosing that 6.1% of U.S. employees have self-identified as having a disability. They expanded the [survey](#) from the US to 45 additional countries, reaching 90% of their employees.
- Increasing the scope of inclusive hiring programmes developing an [Autism Hiring program](#) to include neurodiversity, such as ADD/ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, as well as learning disabilities
- Creating the Microsoft's Disability Employee Resource Group which now includes more than 22 disability communities, with regional and divisional chapters associated with a new Employee Experience Accessibility team that focuses on improving accessibility of Microsoft internal tools, training and content, physical environment and partnerships with their suppliers.
- Microsoft is also proactive in Empowering customers and partners on their accessibility process by developing Microsoft [Accessibility Evolution Model](#), an operational "how to" to help customers and suppliers develop their own accessibility road maps and business plans.

Outcomes

The aim is to improve digital accessibility and enable better integration of people with disabilities into the workplace. According to Agefiph¹, the employment rate for disabled people in France is estimated at 3.5% in the private sector and 5.66% in the public sector.

Technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud services, and newer generation mobile data networks such as 5G enable further opportunities for development and deployment of accessibility solutions.

Developing the business case

In 2018, Accenture conducted [a study in collaboration with US organisations for people with disabilities](#), which found that 45 companies known for excellence in their fields are also leaders in terms of employment and inclusion of disadvantaged people. These companies had 20% higher revenue on average and 30% higher profit margins than their competitors. But accessibility is as well a responsibility of a company to the society, and the inclusion of workers with disabilities have to be considered as well through the prism of ethical issues.

¹ Agefiph, or Association de Gestion du Fonds pour l'Insertion Professionnelle des Personnes Handicapées, is a French association that provides aid and support for the integration of people with disabilities in the workplace

References

<https://news.microsoft.com/en-CEE/2023/02/07/the-inclusion-of-people-with-disabilities-makes-us-stronger-as-a-society/>

<https://blogs.microsoft.com/blog/2021/04/28/doubling-down-on-accessibility-microsofts-next-steps-to-expand-accessibility-in-technology-the-workforce-and-workplace/>