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**Erasing Barriers to Independence**

Graphical user interface, website

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**Introduction**

Imagine you are at work. You want to print out a document for a meeting you are going to. You bring up the print window only to see no options in any of the menus, and no labels on the buttons. However, your neighbor next to you has no issues, despite using the same version of Windows and the same model computer as you. As a result, you must ask a co-worker to every time you need something printed. A frustrating scenario for all involved.

In this example, the affected user was blind. I could see the menus and labels on their screen, but their screen reader could not. It took nearly a month working with the company that built the print driver to find a solution. During that time, anytime this user wanted to print, they had to ask for help. Proper accessibility would have prevented this problem.

**What is Accessibility?**

Accessibility is a term you have probably heard thrown around a lot lately, and with good reason. It is essential, and it is the right thing to do. No one wants to be dependent on others for the things they need to do for work, travel, fun, and every-day life. People don’t want to have to drag someone around with them to every doctor’s appointment, bathroom trip, college course, and more. Most don’t have the luxury of having someone that can be around 24/7 to help them. This lack of independence can make life isolating and frustrating.

You have probably seen the commercials where an elderly person falls in their home and cannot get help, advertising in-home care programs, or the medical emergency alert pendants. That is an issue that impacts people of all ages with mobility reducing conditions, and one of many reasons that Accessibility is essential. People deserve to live life as independently as possible.

To understand the overall importance of Accessibility, it helps to know what Accessibility is. Defining it can be challenging because everyone seems to have a different definition. For me, Accessibility means offering a consistent experience to everyone. It means enabling people to gain equal access to information. It means allowing everyone to the same level of independence in life as possible.

**Why is Accessibility Important?**

When we ensure everyone has equal access to information, society benefits. People make more informed choices and live healthier, more independent lives. Accessibility enables people to work, learn, grow, socialize, and be an integral part of society.

Life is always changing, and no one is immune to the potential need for better access. Accessibility-driven improvements often have a broad impact and become accepted best-practices. Have you ever seen the cuts in the curb that help better indicate crosswalks and make stepping up onto the sidewalk easier? Those were initially used to make things easier for returning US war veterans and others with mobility issues. They started in a single town and quickly spread to become the standard they are today. Have you ever used the textured floor tiles in train stations to help you navigate a busy station? Those were first introduced in Japan to make it easier for visually impaired individuals to navigate train stations. The concept of an Accessibility improvement spreading quickly and having such broad impact is referred to as the Curb Cut effect.

**Lack of Awareness**

If Accessibility improvements have such incredible benefits, why aren’t they more widespread? Often, the biggest issue with making things more accessible is a lack of awareness.

Some accessibility needs are more evident than others, like blindness or being wheelchair-bound. We recognize the white walking cane used by many with vision impairment but don’t necessarily think of how the lack of accessibility can impact their quality of life. One might think there are already solutions out there to address every accessibility need. A great example is the recent Braille Edition and ColorADD UNO cards that were released by Mattel. Many of us can remember how much that game tested or destroyed friendships as we grew up. UNO is a form of nostalgia for many, but a game unavailable to those who are colorblind or have limited sight, until recently. The new versions make the game available to a broader audience who can now share in the experience.

Logo, company name

Description automatically generatedPartnerships with groups like the National Federation of the Blind helped drive this change. They were able to help Mattell understand the need and how to fix it. The best part is that you do not need to be a major company or organization to make a difference. You can help remove access barriers too.

**How Can I Help?**

Improving accessibility requires everyone. It does not matter what you do for a living. You can make a difference by merely watching and pointing out accessibility issues and being an advocate for change. Treat all people with respect and equality.

**Accessibility Resources**

For additional information and to learn more about how you can help, please see the below links, or research the many websites and information available on Accessibility.

* [UEB Online](https://uebonline.org/) – Free online Braille courses.
* [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)](https://www.asha.org/public/hearing/Hearing-Loss-Organizations-and-Associations/) – Provides a list of organizations committed to spreading awareness of various forms of hearing loss.
* [VisionAware](https://www.visionaware.org/) – VisionAware is a site managed by the American Printing House for the Blind that offers guidance and assistance to those impacted.
* [Color Blind Awareness](http://www.colourblindawareness.org/) – Seeks to spread awareness of colorblindness.
* [The Mobility Project](https://themobilityproject.com/pages/links.aspx) – Offers a list of organizations to learn about various mobility-related organizations based on particular conditions (e.g., ALS, MS, Brain/Spinal Cord Injuries).

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