Strategies to Ensure Effective Communication for People with Disabilities

In order to ensure that people with disabilities are provided with equity in workplaces, online and in daily environments, it is essential to ensure that they're communicated with effectively.

Individuals with disabilities make up a significant portion of the US population — one in four adults report having a disability. These numbers translate to more than 61 million Americans. It is crucial for businesses to ensure effective communication with them, as well as all individuals they share information with.

Title III of The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination in any public places of accomodation, including commercial businesses. While the original titles of the ADA suggested that public places of accommodation were only applicable to in-person businesses before the internet was widely used, the emerging consensus among lawmakers and accessibility experts is that the digital parts of business, that is, the information contained on websites, should also be considered public places of accommodation. When it comes to providing effective accommodation, it is essential to provide information that is both clear and understandable to all individuals, in order to provide equity.

Improving the ways in which information is communicated will help improve workplace productivity, as well as meet the needs of a diverse customer base. **In order to help empower individuals with disabilities, business leaders can use these effective communication strategies.**

1.

Provide Accessibility Proactively

Accommodations for employees and clients are often done as a reaction when a request is made. This isn't always the best strategy, as some people with disabilities may not feel comfortable voicing their disabilities publicly or in the workplace. When businesses provide accessibility proactively, they can address their needs to ensure they can participate with equity and without delay.

Planning ahead of time to ensure that accessibility tools and assistive technologies are available for employees and clients is best practice. As outlined by the ADA, businesses can ensure effective communication by utilizing auxiliary aids and services to make auditory information accessible to blind, low vision, Deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

Auxiliary aids can apply to a broad range of services, including but not limited to the following:
- Speech-to-text services, including transcription and captioning of meetings or events
- Note-taking services and materials
- Interpreting services (in person or remote)
- Document conversion services

For example, captioning an event that is live streamed, whether or not an individual has come forward and asked for captioning, ensures that everyone who is Deaf or hard of hearing can access the event and understand what's being said. Captioning then also has an added benefit of improving learning comprehension outcomes for all viewers, regardless of disability needs.

2.

Engage With Individuals and Leaders in the Disability Community

Listening to the needs of members of the disability community themselves is also a crucial step. Statistics show that Deaf people often feel they cannot participate or connect. It's important to help empower people with disabilities by listening to their needs to foster more options for participation in the workplace and at events.

In addition to providing aids like captioning, business leaders should also provide their clients and employees with opportunities to give feedback on their accessibility practices. Surveys are a simple way to get feedback, especially anonymously, and introductory accessibility courses can also be given to train every new employee that joins a team to ensure they're aware of how to help their colleagues succeed. Engaging with individuals with disabilities to understand their needs will allow businesses to build strong connections with these individuals to make for positive results.

3.

Create an Accessibility Response Plan

While providing accessibility proactively is the best approach, businesses can sometimes be met with unforeseen circumstances. It's important to create an accessibility response plan to address these types of situations.

When workforces moved remote in 2020, many began using what are known as Continuity Plans, an action plan that is specifically developed to respond to digital accessibility emergencies. For example, should captioning be needed for a last minute event, what is a process that can be instituted quickly? Developing a continuity plan will help provide guidance and expertise to leaders in the workplace who may not be aware of important accessibility practices and ensure they know how to address these needs quickly.

Accessibility response plans may come to fruition in a form or a guide that provides important questions to ask when an accommodation request is made. Once a form is filled out with relevant information, it can be sent to the appropriate person to manage the situation in a timely manner. An effective action plan will give information about the accessibility issue, provide details of how the situation should be addressed and include an estimated timeline.

4.

Address Attitudes and Biases

In order to provide effective communication, it's also important to address any attitudes or biases that may exist about individuals with disabilities. Research has shown that providing accessibility training on how to effectively work with individuals who are deaf improves a person's thoughts and attitudes towards deafness. Similar accessibility training can be adapted to teach others about the needs of the disability community as a whole.

When it comes to providing equitable accommodations, it's important to approach situations with an open mind. Asking questions and listening, as well as admitting that you are new to offering and understanding accommodations will allow individuals with disabilities to feel more empowered and comfortable expressing their concerns.

5.

Learn and Use Different Communication Styles

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, individuals with disabilities are increasingly entering the workplace. 18% are employed in the US. While individuals do not always report their disability needs, it's crucial to sit down with any individuals who have, in order to have a conversation about their needs and communication preferences. There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach when it comes to communicating with individuals with disabilities. A person's individual communication style may differ greatly from person to person.

For example, an employee who is Deaf or hard of hearing may prefer that you communicate with them through writing, such as emails or text messages, while others may prefer to communicate on a video call. Giving individuals the agency to decide what communication style to use, as well as an opportunity to voice their preferences, will allow businesses to foster a positive space for them to thrive.

Committing to Effective Communication and Accessibility

When businesses have the knowledge and tools to provide effective communication, they can ensure they meet the needs of their workplace and diverse customer base. Taking an accessibility-first approach will help create a culture of commitment to providing effective communication and will ensure that equitable access and opportunities are provided for all individuals.

While providing effective communication is not always straightforward, business leaders can take actionable steps to make their work environments and digital content more widely accessible to everyone. AST recognizes the paramount importance of effective communication for businesses. As a result, AST's focus on providing high-quality video accessibility services is second to none. AST's video accessibility experts and its dedicated support team have extensive experience in helping business leaders navigate accessibility challenges. AST can help arm business leaders with key insights and the technologies necessary to meet these needs.

To learn more about providing effective communication and offer greater video accessibility with services like captioning, **reach out**.