Accessibility In The Workplace: What Businesses Need To Know: Part 4

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This is the final instalment in our series looking at accessibility in the workplace. Part 1 looked at the importance of deploying accessible IT in order to benefit employees and businesses. Part 2 examined national equality laws requiring businesses to make "reasonable accommodations" for employees in the workplace. In part 3, we set out how industry standards are playing an increasingly important role in helping organizations demonstrate compliance with accessibility requirements.

In this final instalment, we look at practical steps businesses can take to improve their accessibility credentials.

Practical steps

In light of the increasing importance of ensuring workplace accessibility and diversity, both as good business practice and in order to meet legal obligations, it is advisable that enterprises start pushing accessibility higher up the agenda. Companies can kickstart this process by reviewing their policies on workplace inclusion, procurement of IT and accessibility in the recruitment process.

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A useful starting point for all enterprises is to "take stock" of their current workplace and customer-facing IT systems and environments and current practices regarding provision of accessible IT — asking essential questions about how accessible the technology is that they procure and provide to employees, customers and others. Discussions with an organization's software vendors can also be useful to find out more information about what accessibility features are already embedded within the IT that they have purchased for the company. Employers should consider not only the accessibility of the IT they provide to their employees and customers, but also the extent to which content created either internally or by third parties for employees is accessible.

Embed IT accessibility considerations into the organization's employment lifecycle. In particular, consider use of accessible IT:

- during the **recruitment process.** The Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology ("PEAT")'s TalentWorks online tool might be a useful starting point for employers and human resources professionals needing assistance with ensuring that online job applications and other eRecruiting technologies are accessible to job seekers with disabilities;
- in the course of employment, in order for employees to fulfill their **employment duties**; and
- to implement **employee training** practices.

Embed accessibility considerations in the organization's **IT procurement processes.** Procuring IT with built-in accessibility capabilities (in other words, IT that meets the EN 301 549 standard or the standard in Section 508,) should reduce the need for add-ons later down the line. Accessibility should be a mandatory award criterion in procurement decisions and/or RFPs. Vendors should be asked to explain and demonstrate their accessibility tools and compliance with accessibility standards. One way vendors might do this is via a "Voluntary Product Accessibility Template" (or "VPAT"). This is a document that helps vendors demonstrate a product's conformity with the accessibility standards in Section 508 and, potentially, with other international standards as well. Some vendor organizations include customer support channels for accessibility as well as publishing product roadmaps for customers' long-term accessibility planning. The Business Disability Initiative is in the process of designing an

"accessible IT tendering toolkit" which may assist procurement professionals in meeting accessibility standards going forward.

Embed accessibility considerations into **company culture.** Consider training the workforce to understand modern accessibility standards, equality law and company policies and procedures regarding accessible IT. Employers might address:

- commitment to workplace accessibility from senior management;
- ensuring that departments within the business, including IT, human resources, legal and procurement, understand accessibility standards and the company's obligations in the procurement process;
- training of workforce at large. For example, employers might consider training employees to use built-in capabilities to seek to be more inclusive in both internal and external communications and content.

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