Getting Engaged: Facilitating Virtual Events for Maximum Accessibility[1]

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Introduction

Virtual and hybrid events present both challenges and opportunities for engaging persons with disabilities. In particular, accommodations for people who are blind or low vision, and deaf or hard of hearing, are common challenges that technology has been able to address but still require some diligence on the part of facilitators for virtual and in-person events, alike. However, centering accessibility for disabled people* often makes your events more welcoming for non-disabled participants as well. This publication will overview strategies for event facilitators to ensure maximum accessibility for virtual events, allowing a wide variety of participants. Evaluation of your events is vital to these efforts but will be covered in a separate publication.

(*Note: As there is no consensus in the disability community on the use of person-first language, that is "persons with disabilities," versus identity-first language, that is "disabled person," I have chosen to use both versions throughout.)

Disability

First, recognize people with disabilities are human. To some, this may seem obvious, but as far as we have come in recognizing the dignity of all lives, there are still pockets of society who see disabled people as less than (Dunn, 2021; Kovac, 2018, 2019; Kukla, 2022; Larocque & Foth, 2021; Nagy, 2018; Solomon, 2019; World Health Organization, 2020). Whether individuals face instances of discrimination

in healthcare, transportation, or housing access (among other areas), or systemic ableism impacts many people over longer periods of time, "[t]he burden of being perceived as different persists" (Solomon, 2019, p. subtitle). As recently as 2023, some U.S. states pursued legislation that will lead to higher institutionalization of people with disabilities (Harris, 2023), going against years of advocacy for self-determination and independence (Administration for Community Living, 2023; West Virginia University Center for Excellence in Disabilities, n.d.). Recent research with people with disabilities stresses the point of recognizing personhood as a necessary first step in providing dignity to disabled people (Chapman et al., 2023).

Approximately 25% of U.S. adult residents (CDC, 2019) and 33% of adult Floridians (Florida Department of Health, 2021) are disabled. Disability is generally the only marginalized identity group that all people can become part of at any time. Disability is a broad spectrum of limitations to daily life, from neuropsychological, to physical, to chronic illness. However, these limitations are not strictly medical but also social, as "Disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support" (World Health Organization, n.d.).

More than Accommodations — Changes to Your Event to Address Needs

All humans have needs. Understanding and planning for everyone's needs will allow you to best serve all clients and participants. For example, lacking access to food and child-care may require people, with or without disabilities, to participate in virtual events rather than in person. However, simply providing a virtual event may not overcome these barriers; you may need to explicitly plan for time for people to eat, or explicitly welcome participants to do so during the event as needed. People with disabilities may need support for another paid caregiver to watch children or others so that participants can engage without distractions. Accommodations such as supporting food and childcare or adding captions and image descriptions are likely to help people without disabilities on top of making full participation possible for those with particular disabilities—this is what's known as the "curb-cut effect" (Blackwell, 2017). Designing for everyone, such as by following principles of universal design for learning (Stapleton-Corcoran, 2022), will help make your event accessible from the start. Incorporating accessibility and universal design into larger program planning as well as event planning will strengthen both.

Best Practices for Accessibility

To appropriately plan for maximum accessibility, the following section outlines best practices. Recognize accessibility is a moving goal; needs may change even in the moment, such as when someone has an acute onset of a headache, so an event that starts out accessible to all participants may not remain so throughout its duration. It may be impossible to provide all accommodations at once, as offering some accommodations may actually exclude others. If people, disabled or otherwise, have to search for or ask separately for accommodations, this is already an additional burden on them (phdisabled, 2014). To best alleviate this obstacle, gather information up front about participant needs (Rewa & Hunter, 2020). Also offer multiple ways to engage, such as synchronously and asynchronously, even to the point of facilitating the event multiple times if necessary.

Planning the Event

- Ask first, is a virtual or hybrid space the right way to facilitate my event? Consider the checklists offered at Baker et al. (2020) to determine the best format. For example, do your participants and your team have adequate access to and familiarity with online platforms you would use for the event?

- Consider your host group's "team profile" (Baker & Benge, 2021, p. 1). Do you have all the necessary competencies and identities represented to ensure maximum accessibility? For example, besides technology, are your facilitators competent in event management for accessibility? Are people with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities, part of your team or advisors (Leary, 2020)?

- If your participants are likely to be less familiar or comfortable with virtual formats, consider sharing a guide in advance about how to engage meaningfully, such as prompting participants to clear their schedule before the event and actively participate (Shellhouse & Baker, 2020). Choose the right technology, including not only the platform but also options such as meeting versus webinar or conference setup, as well as recording and chat features (Shellhouse et al., 2021). Consider the platform's accessibility features primarily; if features don't exist, reach out to the software development team and advocate for them as an ally.

- Assess your strategies for facilitating virtual events to engage a variety of participants, such as by encouraging active engagement and recognizing contributions through shared power (Silvert et al., 2021b). Such well-developed facilitation will build trust.

- Ideally, involve additional facilitators who can be primarily focused on accommodations and changes if needed. The Society of Disabled Oracles provided "access magicians" at their 2023 online launch party who were highlighted as such in the participant list, in introductory materials, in the participation guide, and throughout the event. The magicians were added as co-hosts with many of the administrative privileges for the event, making them obvious at the top of the participant list. They were available for one-on-one support throughout the event.

- Budget for accommodation needs. If American Sign Language (ASL) or other sign language interpretation is not part of your team's skills, budget for this interpretation and plan to provide it. Providing and advertising widely available accommodations without requiring participants to request them (see Example 1) welcomes those who need such accommodations and reduces the burden on them to request it.

- Ensure all materials are accessible (Leary, 2020) by removing any strobing or flashing animations, adding captions to videos, correcting auto-generated captions,

avoiding the use of color to convey meaning, and maintaining legible font sizes and styles.

- Plan to evaluate your event to determine what went well and what could be improved for next time. At a minimum, ask your participants for this short feedback through a chat, an online poll, or even a short survey sent after the event if you have retained contact information. Silvert et al. (2021a) discuss evaluating your virtual events. For more information, see other documents on evaluation in the Additional Resources section and the forthcoming EDIS on accessible evaluation.

- Ensure your advertising itself is accessible. For example, do not send emails with text solely embedded in an image, and ensure your font sizes and colors adhere to accessibility guidelines (Harvard University Information Technology, 2022). Adobe Acrobat has an accessibility check process for PDF documents. The IFAS Communications team can also help review your advertising for accessibility. Submit your PDF, Word, and PowerPoint files to Workfront by making a new request, selecting "UF/IFAS Communications Requests," and asking for ADA remediation in the subject line. When filling out a simple form, the team will send your request to the right unit, or you can choose "ADA Document Accessibility" when filling out a detailed form. Learn more here: https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/ifascomm/2023/04/25/new-accessible-document-services/.

- Advertise the availability or lack of an event recording up front. See Example 1 about event advertising.

Setting Up for the Event

- Turn on captions every time, automatically. Figure out how to configure this in your account before your next meeting.

- Set up your space with lighting that shows the speaker, plain backgrounds, and low ambient audio such as air conditioning (The National Disability Rights Network, n.d.).

- Use technology features, such as Spotlight and Pin in Zoom or Teams, to make sure your ASL interpreters or other access magicians are kept on-screen even as other speakers come in and out of view, especially in webinar or conference setups (The National Disability Rights Network, n.d.).

- Review language and style guides for widely accepted language. If you are creating an event focusing on or prioritizing a specific population, ask them their preference on language to be used.

- Prepare presenters with event guidelines and access guidelines (Shellhouse et al., 2021; Stofer, 2017; Stofer, Hanson, and Hecht, 2023). See Example 2 for an example event guideline for accessibility.

- Create and share a participation guide with information on the event link, agenda, accommodations that will or will not be present, and ways to request additional accommodations (Society of Disabled Oracles, 2023). Giving this information clearly and up-front will reduce the burden on those who need to ask.

Running the Event

- Acknowledge limitations. For example, systems that provide automated captions may use biased data for training, potentially leading to getting some words (from other languages, especially those of North American Indigenous peoples) wrong more often than not. Consider adding alternative captioning, such as StreamText (https://streamtext.net/). If the technology has limitations or is malfunctioning, acknowledge these frustrations and offer alternative ways to participate (such as reading a later transcript or watching an edited recording) if possible.

- At the beginning, go over access features of the event. This includes reviewing the agenda aloud, not simply posting it on a screen (Society of Disabled Oracles, 2023).

- If you are recording the event, make sure to ask participants for permission. Notify participants what will be recorded, such as only speaker view versus all participants and so forth.

- Invite participants to add pronouns to their screen names.

- Set participation guidelines. For example, you may let participants know they should "disrespect etiquette to respect access" as modeled by the Society of Disabled Oracles' (2023) launch event. They also planned for the need to regroup in a different room and directed participants to monitor the online participation guide for a new link if one became necessary.

- Pause at the end of this introduction, allowing people time to set up their virtual environments as needed and to request further access or ask questions.

During the Event

- Remind people of access options multiple times throughout the event. Monitor requests for access throughout (using access magicians or similar). Remind people that access needs may change and invite them to prioritize those needs.

- Offer spoken visual descriptions of people speaking and any visuals shared, similar to written alt-text for images, which is turned into audio for those who are blind or low-vision (The National Disability Rights Network, n.d.).

- Speak deliberately and slowly to accommodate people with language or processing disabilities (The National Disability Rights Network, n.d.).

- Consider putting less content in your program. Offer sufficient breaks, direct participants to asynchronous resources before and after the synchronous portion, and/or spread your content into multiple sessions, if necessary.

Examples for Setting Expectations

In the following sections, two examples demonstrate a shorter- and longer-form set of expectations and accessibility features. One important idea includes clearly sharing the access features that are already planned and providing an invitation to make further requests. In the second example, participants were invited to help provide access during the event; see the section, Access Roles, where users could provide audio and sound descriptions, among other things. Each example shares how the event is or is not designed for participation, providing ways to participate actively or passively. The Society of Disabled Oracles (2023) offered participation cards as virtual backgrounds to indicate level of participation.

Both examples also describe the availability of the recording, an example of the "curb-cut effect" of design that centers access. This effect refers to how the creation of curb cuts, or ramps, at the end of sidewalks for people with mobility disabilities actually benefitted a wide range of users beyond the initial audience, including people pushing strollers, cyclists, skaters, and delivery personnel (Blackwell, 2017). In this case, the much more ubiquitous availability of recording online events makes it more likely that anyone, regardless of access needs, can participate asynchronously. Moreover, event hosts who state up front that recordings will (or will not) be available can cut down on inquiries from potential registrants.

Example 1. Inclusive Design Jam Event

The first example is from the event sign-up web page for an Inclusive Design Jam (https://www.inclusivedesignjam.com/) "Community Jam" workshop on Trauma-Informed Design held in March 2023. It clearly states what accessibility will be available, participation expectations, and the availability of recordings:

"What to Expect
This session will be shaped by contributions from all attendees — we encourage you to share your questions, no matter your degree of experience with inclusive design. Our host … and community guides will help to guide the discussion and some workshopping!

Accessibility & Inclusion Considerations
- You can choose to lean in and actively participate or step back and follow along in silence.

- You can join via desktop or mobile — we'll adapt any tools we use and facilitation techniques to however people connect.

- We will provide closed captions, live transcripts and visual descriptions to the best of our ability.

Please send us any other accommodation requests upon signing up and we'll do our best to honor them! If you can't make it, we'll send out a recording (if all attendees consent to this) afterwards to all those who register as well as our community members" (*Inclusive Design Jam*, n.d.).

Example 2. Society of Disabled Oracles Launch Party

In a second example, the Participation Guide from the Society of Disabled Oracles Launch Party in March 2023 demonstrates guidelines shared both before and during the event for participation expectations. The guide also features a section on safety and the methods that event hosts may use to continue ensuring safety from abusive behavior. They note that such behavior may not always be possible to fully outline in advance, demonstrating flexibility and vigilance in maintaining inclusion. The guide also contains links to further helpful resources such as those on de-escalation.

Once the event started, the Society reviewed the participation guide aloud and also reminded participants to prioritize access over etiquette. Additional Zoom features they mentioned and demonstrated at the start of the event included the following: multi-pin access that could be requested from hosts if needed, CART captions that users can turn on, and audio description that will also describe the chat.

Conclusion

Virtual or hybrid events are mainstays of U.S.-based organizations today. However, despite the rapid adoption during COVID-19 lockdowns, these cannot and should not be done without considerations of the tradeoffs, especially

for accessibility. The practices provided here can help hosts plan for inclusion and accessibility, making their events available to wider audiences. Thorough, thoughtful planning up front with necessary resources and expertise carried throughout the event and in reflection, will not only make events open to all but also increase the chances people with disabilities will feel welcomed and sought after instead of an afterthought or a compliance checkbox.

Additional Resources

Continue reading for additional resources related to inclusive imagery, documents and materials on accessibility, EDIS publications on online meeting technologies, additional accessibility publications from EDIS covering social media and in-person events, and more on universal design.

Accessibility Online's Inclusive Imagery — Writing Text Depicting People with Disabilities and Other Marginalized Identities: https://www.accessibilityonline.org/ada-tech/archives/111046

American Foundation for the Blind, "Taking Associations for Granted: Accidental Exclusions": https://www.afb.org/blog/entry/taking-associations-granted

Customer Communications Toolkit: A Universal Design Approach: https://universaldesign.ie/communications-digital/customer-communications-toolkit-a-universal-design-approach/customer-communications-toolkit-a-universal-design-approach-navigation

EDIS Publication #PI286, "Delivering Secure CEU Training Utilizing Zoom": https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/PI286

EDIS Publication #PI290, "Microsoft Teams for CEU Training Delivery": https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/PI290

EDIS Publication #AEC723, "The Road to Recovery #6: Evaluation Virtual Strategies to Build Community Capacity and Resilience": https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/WC385

EDIS Publication #AEC345, "Instructional Methods for Distance Education": https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/WC026

EDIS Publication #AEC766, "Using Social Media to Engage Communities with Research": Accessibility: https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/WC427

EDIS Publication #AEC636, "Getting Engaged: Program and Event Planning for Clients for All Abilities": https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/WC299

Inclusive Design Starter Guide: https://inclusivedesignjam.com/learn/starter-guide

National Disability Rights Network, Documents and Materials Accessibility Guidelines: https://www.ndrn.org/accessibility-guidelines/

Society of Disabled Oracles, Launch Party Participation Guide: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1x6BOLcTzcgipCmvQiKVE1uUdHxMi08Tkc5tTmEcUqwc/edit

University of Washington DO IT, Universal Design versus Accommodation: https://www.washington.edu/doit/universal-design-vs-accommodation

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