Desk Research

The Engagement First initiative strives to find the specific needs of corporate events, this research will explore how to make corporate events more accessible for those living with a disability. When considering the key barriers to accessibility and inclusion at corporate events whether physically or virtual attending, focusing on disability, in order to comprehensively provide an insight, it was felt important to break it down into two sections - physical events and virtual events - as well as provide insight from the perspective of various types of disability which are:

- **Physical Disability** – "A physical disability is a physical condition that affects a person's mobility, physical capacity, stamina, or dexterity." (What is a Physical Disability? | Achieve Australia, 2019)
- **Visually Impaired** - "Total blindness is the inability to tell light from dark, or the total inability to see. Visual impairment or low vision is a severereduction in vision that cannot be corrected with standard glasses or contact lenses and reduces a person's ability to function at certain or all tasks." (Visual Impairment, n.d.)
- **Hearing Impaired** – "A person who is not able to hear as well as someone with normal hearing – hearing thresholds of 25 dB or better in both ears " (Deafness and hearing loss, 2020)
- **Neurodiverse** – "Neurodiversity is a concept... differences can include those labelled with Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Dyscalculia, Autistic Spectrum, Tourette Syndrome, and others" (What is Neurodiversity?, n.d.)
- **Hidden Disability** – "...disability is a physical, mental or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person's movements, senses, or activities." (How do you define invisible disability? | invisible disability definition, n.d.)

It is important to point out that it is hard to define disability because there is often a cross over of abilities, however for the purpose of this research the definitions above will be used in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the needs of various disabilities.

Section 1 of this report will cover physical events and an overview of how to make these accessible to disabled people. Although physical events have been run for many years, accessibility is still an issue and therefore it is felt important to discuss this.

Section 2 will explore how to make virtual events more accessible to disabled people. With virtual events becoming a relatively new, yet popular choice amongst event companies, it is imperative that the various needs across all types of disabilities are highlighted in order for virtual events to be fully accessible.

Section 1 - Physical Events

When discussing the accessibility of physical events, the focus is often on physical barriers such as steps, ramps, lifts etc. However, there are many more barriers faced by disabled people, and also provisions that are often viewed as accessible but for many are not, such as standard disabled toilets.

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)
outline the Principles of Inclusive Design, this relates to the built environment, therefore it is felt the principles should be followed when organising physical events.

- **Inclusive** – so everyone can use it safely, easily and with dignity
- **Responsive** – taking account of what people say they need and want
- **Flexible** – so different people can use it in different ways
- **Convenient** – so everyone can use it without too much effort or separation
- **Accommodating** for all people, regardless of their age, gender, mobility, ethnicity or circumstances
- **Welcoming** – with no disabling barriers that might exclude some people
- **Realistic** – offering more than one solution to help balance everyone's needs and recognising that one solution may not work for all

(Inclusive Design Hub, 2020)

In order to clearly explain the needs of various disabilities, this section will be broken down into five sections to cover the needs of Physical/Mobility Impaired, Visually Impaired, Hearing Impaired, Neurodiverse and Hidden Disabilities. Some needs may cross over; however, it is felt breaking down the needs of various disabilities will result in a more comprehensive list of needs.

The accessibility needs of people with _physical/mobility disabilities_ are generally seen as needing disabled parking bays, ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, spaces for wheelchairs in lecture theatres/halls and lowered tables.

However, there are more needs that are often not the 'standard' and often lead to lack of accessibility for many physically disabled people. An example of this is accessible toilets, for a lot of physically disabled people, the standard accessible toilets are in fact, not accessible. "For over 250,000 disabled people in the UK and millions more worldwide the only place they can go to the toilet is their own home." (Home - Mobiloo, 2020) This means people are left unable to go to the toilet for the duration of the day, some disabled people, including the researcher, end up opting for a _medically unnecessary_ surgery to be able to go to the toilet when not at home because provisions such as Changing Places are so scarce. This issue is across the board, not just within corporate events, and often an issue with the venue rather than the event itself. However, in this situation, if the venue does not have a Changing Places, the event company should hire a mobile Changing Places - a Mobiloo - in order to provide this provision.

Another barrier physically disabled people face is the provision for carers. Although becoming more the norm, the provision of a free carers space - including for food and accommodation - needs to be more widely available in order to make physical events more accessible as, often, the cost of paying for two tickets means the event is unaffordable for disabled people.

This leads to another barrier, accommodation, accessible accommodation is often very difficult to come by, and is often more expensive, therefore if an event is offering accommodation, it is imperative that accessible accommodation is offered at the same price as non-accessible accommodation, and if the venue's accommodation is not accessible, alternative accommodation should be offered during booking.

In terms of Visually Impaired people, the RNBI states that research shows the biggest barrier faced by blind and visually impaired people is lack of knowledge and understanding, and outdated attitudes towards sight loss. (Blind people reveal the biggest barrier they face in everyday life., 2018)

Another barrier for visually impaired people is that, often, a lot of information such as maps, signs, direction signals, timetables and PowerPoints are visual information, which, is inaccessible for visually impaired people. (Challenges blind people face when living life, 2019) Therefore it is imperative that documents and resources are available to download digitally prior to the event in a screen reader compatible format such as Microsoft Word. As well as

this, accommodating guide dogs and making sure walkways are clear of trip hazards are imperative to an accessible event.

Accessibility issues for *hearing impaired* people at events include, knowing which hearing aid loop is being used, the availability of a BSL interpreter for every speaker, provision for seating assignment in order to be as close to the presenter as possible. However, there are also barriers in terms of good communication skills, The University of California San Francisco state,

> "Successful communication requires the efforts of all people involved in a conversation. Even when the person with hearing loss utilizes hearing aids and active listening strategies, it is crucial that others involved in the communication process consistently use good communication strategies..." (Communicating with People with Hearing Loss, 2021)

Please see appendix 1 for full list of communication strategies suggested by The University of California San Francisco.

Many *Neurodiverse* conditions are experienced on a spectrum, therefore, a one-sized-fits-all approach to inclusivity and accessibility for neurodiversity cannot be used, as ACAS (n.d.) explains "...the effects of dyspraxia on one person can be different to another person who also has dyspraxia. The effects on the individual can also change over time." (Neurodiversity in the workplace | Acas, n.d.)

Therefore, it is important to not stereotype neurodiverse people as each person presents differently, some neurodiverse people find that they are not always believed because they do not present like stereotypical neurodiverse and subsequently find they do not receive the adjustments and accommodations they need.

Some of the problems neurodiverse people can face are sensory overload, being directionally challenged, managing changes in schedules at short notice, social cues, reading text and concentration. Therefore, it is imperative that neurodiverse people can communicate their needs and the accommodations and adjustments are made accordingly.

The biggest barrier for *hidden disabilities* is that people cannot see the disability, therefore do not understand or believe the person's needs, and although hidden disabilities are covered by the 2010 Equality Act, this sometimes means accommodations or adjustments are not made.

Another barrier are also internal barriers, a BBC article explains that a 2011 survey found that 88% of people who have hidden disabilities have a negative view of disclosing their disability as they worry about being labelled. (Holland, 2017)

Like neurodiverse people, a one-size-fits-all approach can not be taken to accommodating hidden disabilities, therefore it is imperative that people are made to feel comfortable requesting accommodations and that they are listened to.

Section 2 – Virtual Events

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many events have been moved into the virtual environment, and for many disabled people, this has meant they have been able to attend events they would have not been able to physically.

For many disabled people, travelling and finding accommodation causes huge barriers and often means attending one-day events is not feasible, therefore, going virtual has opened the door to many events for disabled people. Often for many disabled people, using public transport is challenging, having to book in advance and also having to pay for two tickets in order to accommodate carers.

For people with _physical disabilities,_ virtual events often remove the biggest barriers, as well as barriers often not considered, such as networking, when using a wheelchair without a riser function, people are at a lower height than everyone else, meaning it can often be difficult to be seen or heard in busy places. Virtual networking removes this barrier as heigh is not a contributing factor to being seen or heard.

However, virtual events do not come without their barriers. For _visually impaired_ people, the screensharing function that is widely used is not accessible. This is because screen readers pick up the screen share as an image, and therefore do not give the person all the information being presented. (Pilling et al, 2004) Therefore, in order to be inclusive, the document/slides that are going to be used on screenshare need to be sent in advance to participants, in the format requested. This is because some formats, such as PDF are not compatible with screen readers.

For people with _hearing impairments_, the provision of subtitles, or a BSL interpreter are not often available (Pilling et al, 2004). Some online platforms, such as Google Meets offer a built in subtitle feature, whereas other platforms have to be used alongside other software in order for subtitles to be provided. Therefore, it is imperative that, whether physical or virtual, a BSL interpreter is available and an event in order to be fully accessible.

For _neurodiverse_ people, virtual platforms have both positive and negative attributes when it comes to accessibility and inclusion. The positives are that they are able to attend from home, in an environment that they are comfortable in. However, often social cues, such as when someone is about to speak, are more difficult to read on online platforms, therefore people can struggle to contribute and take part. Solutions for this include using the raise hand function when you want to contribute, or for the host to ask people if they have anything they would like to say.

For people with _hidden disabilities_ often the biggest barrier, as mentioned above, whether physical or virtual, the biggest barrier is often attitudinal, that because the disability can not be seen, people are less likely to make the accommodations that are needed, even when requested.

In conclusion, there are various barriers to both physical and virtual events with many different solutions, however, it could be said that the barriers to virtual events are a lot easier to overcome than those to physical barriers. It is also felt that when running physical events, enabling people to also attend virtually would hugely help with accessibility of corporate events. Nevertheless, the most important thing when running corporate events is to ask people what accommodations or adjustments they need. Often when trying to find accessibility information, it can be difficult to know who to contact, therefore within the booking information a short paragraph stating that if someone needs any accommodations, adjustments or accessibility information, please contact x would be extremely helpful to disabled people and also demonstrate inclusivity, that accessibility is at the forefront of the event and not seen as an issue. It is also imperative to listen to the requests, especially if documents are being requested in specific formats, also there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to accessibility and therefore flexibility around accessibility is vital.

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Appendix 1 – Communication Strategies suggested by The University of California San Francisco.

- Face the hearing-impaired person directly, on the same level and in good light whenever possible. Position yourself so that the light is shining on the speaker's face, not in the eyes of the listener.
- Do not talk from another room. Not being able to see each other when talking is a common reason people have difficulty understanding what is said.
- Speak clearly, slowly, distinctly, but naturally, without shouting or exaggerating mouth movements. Shouting distorts the sound of speech and may make speech reading more difficult.
- Say the person's name before beginning a conversation. This gives the listener a chance to focus attention and reduces the chance of missing words at the beginning of the conversation.
- Avoid talking too rapidly or using sentences that are too complex. Slow down a little, pause between sentences or phrases, and wait to make sure you have been understood before going on.
- Keep your hands away from your face while talking. If you are eating, chewing, smoking, etc. while talking, your speech will be more difficult to understand. Beards and moustaches can also interfere with the ability of the hearing impaired to speech read.
- If the hearing-impaired listener hears better in one ear than the other, try to make a point of remembering which ear is better so that you will know where to position yourself.
- Be aware of possible distortion of sounds for the hearing-impaired person. They may hear your voice, but still may have difficulty understanding some words.
- Most hearing-impaired people have greater difficulty understanding speech when there is background noise. Try to minimize extraneous noise when talking.
- Some people with hearing loss are very sensitive to loud sounds. This reduced tolerance for loud sounds is not uncommon. Avoid situations where there will be loud sounds when possible.
- If the hearing-impaired person has difficulty understanding a particular phrase or word, try to find a different way of saying the same thing, rather than repeating the original words over and over.
- Acquaint the listener with the general topic of the conversation. Avoid sudden changes of topic. If the subject is changed, tell the hearing impaired person what you are talking about now. In a group setting, repeat questions or key facts before continuing with the discussion.
- If you are giving specific information – such as time, place or phone numbers – to someone who is hearing impaired, have them repeat the specifics back to you. Many numbers and words sound alike.
- Whenever possible, provide pertinent information in writing, such as directions, schedules, work assignments, etc.

- Recognize that everyone, especially the hard-of-hearing, has a harder time hearing and understanding when ill or tired.
- Pay attention to the listener. A puzzled look may indicate misunderstanding. Tactfully ask the hearing-impaired person if they understood you, or ask leading questions so you know your message got across.
- Take turns speaking and avoid interrupting other speakers.
- Enrol in aural rehabilitation classes with your hearing-impaired spouse or friend.

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