



Equal Access: Universal Design of Conference Exhibits and Presentations

DO-IT

A checklist for making conference exhibits and presentations welcoming and accessible to everyone

by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

Increasing numbers of people with disabilities attend professional conferences and meetings. Most presenters and exhibitors have the goal that everyone who visits an exhibit, attends a presentation, or seeks information from a publication is able to do so. Reaching this goal involves efforts at many levels. Following are a few examples:

- Exhibits and presentation rooms need to be arranged in such a way that individuals using wheelchairs can access materials and products, see the presenters, and otherwise fully participate.
- Presenters need to deliver spoken, video, and printed information in multiple formats so that participants with sensory impairments can access the content.
- Webmasters, product developers, and material creators need to be aware of accessibility issues and apply accessible design principles.

Legal Issues

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments of 2008 prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities. According to these laws, no otherwise qualified person with a disability shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity of a public entity. This means that conference and meeting activities should be accessible to attendees with disabilities.

Universal Design

An approach to making facilities, information, and activities accessible to and usable by everyone is called universal design. Universal design means that rather than designing for the average user, you design for people with a broad range of characteristics such as native language, gender,

racial and ethnic background, age, and disability. Make sure that presenters and exhibit staff are trained to support people with disabilities, respond to specific requests for accommodations in a timely manner, and know who to contact regarding disability-related issues. Ensure that everyone feels welcome, and can

- get to the facility and maneuver within it,
- communicate effectively with support staff,
- access printed materials and electronic resources, and
- fully participate in events and other activities.

Guidelines and Examples

Addressing the following questions provides a good starting point for making your conference exhibits, presentations, and information resources universally accessible. This content does not provide legal advice. Contact the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) for information about legal mandates.

Exhibit and Presentation Facilities

Ensure physical access, comfort, and safety within an environment that is inclusive to people with a variety of abilities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, and ages.

- Is the exhibit and presentation area wheelchair accessible? Aisles should be kept wide and clear of obstructions for the safety of users who have mobility or visual impairments. Remove a few chairs in a presentation room or lab so that a wheelchair user has options for locations to sit in the room.
- Are signs and posters in high contrast and large print so that they can be read by someone with limited vision?



Staff

Make sure that staff members are prepared to work with all participants.

- Do all staff members know how to respond to requests for disability-related accommodations provided by your organization (e.g., presentation and exhibit materials in alternate formats) and by the conference organizer (e.g., sign language interpreters)?
- Are all staff members aware of issues related to communicating with participants who have disabilities? See Presentation, Exhibit, and other Communication Hints at the end of this publication for specific guidelines. For further suggestions, consult *Effective Communication: Faculty and Students with Disabilities*.¹
- Are staff and contractors that create materials used in exhibits and presentations (e.g., web pages, video presentations) knowledgeable about accessibility considerations and directed to employ accessible design principles?

Information Resources and Technology

If your exhibit or presentation uses computers as information resources, ensure these systems employ accessible design, that staff members are aware of accessibility options, and systems are in place to make accommodations.

- In key publications, do you include a statement about your commitment to universal access and procedures for requesting disability-related accommodations? For example, you could include the following statement: "Our goal is to make all materials and products accessible to everyone. Please inform staff of accessibility barriers you encounter and request accommodations that will make our programs, and information resources accessible to you."
- Are all printed publications available (immediately or in a timely manner) in alternate formats such as Braille, large print, and electronic text?
- Are key documents provided in language(s) other than English?
- Are printed materials within easy reach from a variety of heights and without furniture blocking access? Are staff ready to assist visitors who cannot reach handouts?

- Do overhead presentation materials use large, clear characters that can be seen by most individuals from the back of a large room? If you demonstrate web pages do you present them in enlarged print that participants who have visual impairments can read? Do you also ensure that key content is spoken?
- Do electronic resources, including web pages, adhere to accessibility guidelines or standards adopted by your organization, project, or funding source? *Guide to the Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology*² and the World Wide Web Consortium's *Accessibility Guidelines*³ are most commonly used. For information about making your website accessible to everyone, consult the *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* video and publication.⁴
- Do video presentations developed or used in your exhibit or presentation have captions? It is also a good idea to have them audio described (where additional visual content is verbalized for someone who is blind) or have a transcription available in a text format.
- If your exhibit or presentation provides computers for participants, are you ready to respond to requests for assistive technology that individuals with disabilities might make? In most cases, it would be reasonable that such requests be made before the event; adopt a procedure to respond in a timely manner.
- Do you place computers on an adjustable-height table?
- Do you provide a trackball for someone unable to use a mouse?
- Do you provide a large screen monitor and enlargement software (often built into an application)?
- If your company produces electronic technology, is it designed in such a way to be accessible to people with disabilities? A universal design approach is appropriate here; the U.S. Federal Government provides a model for accessible design in its *Guide to the Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology*.²



Checklist Updates

This checklist was field tested at more than twenty postsecondary institutions nationwide.⁵ The results of a nationwide survey to test face-validity of checklist items led to further refinement of the checklist. To increase the usefulness of this working document, send suggestions to sherylb@uw.edu.

Additional Resources

To learn more about making conferences accessible, consult *Accessible Conference Guide* published by SIGACCESS and written by Shari Trewin.⁶

For more detailed content online consult *Making Exhibits Accessible*⁷, *Removing Barriers: Planning Meetings That Are Accessible To All Participants*⁸, *Creating Video and Multimedia Products That Are Accessible to People with Sensory Impairments*⁹, *Working Together* videos and publications¹⁰, and the *Equal Access: Universal of Design Computer Labs* video and publication.¹¹

For more information about applications of universal design consult *The Center for Universal Design in Education*.¹² The book *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice, Second Edition* published by Harvard Education Press shares perspectives of UD leaders nationwide. To learn more or order online, visit the DO-IT website.¹³

Cited Web Resources

1. www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/effective.html
2. www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/
3. www.w3.org/WAI/
4. www.uw.edu/doit/Video/www.html
5. www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/admin.html
6. www.sigaccess.org/community/accessible_conference/
7. www.openexhibits.org/research/cmme/
8. <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncodh/pdfs/rbmeetingguide.pdf>
9. www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Technology/vid_sensory.html
10. www.uw.edu/doit/Resources/at.html
11. www.uw.edu/doit/Video/equal.html
12. www.uw.edu/doit/CUDE/
13. www.uw.edu/doit/universal-design-higher-education-principles-practice-1

About DO-IT

DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) serves to increase the successful participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers such as those in science, engineering, mathematics, and technology.

For further information, to be placed on the DO-it mailing list, request materials in an alternate format, or to make comments or suggestions about DO-IT publications or web pages, contact:

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Acknowledgment

This publication is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Education (Grant #P333A020044) and the National Science Foundation (Cooperative Agreement #HRD-0227995). Any questions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the federal government.

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Communication Hints

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration with which you treat others. Here are some helpful hints when it comes to delivering a presentation, hosting an exhibit, and otherwise relating to people with disabilities.

General

- Ask a person with a disability if that person needs help before providing assistance.
- Talk directly to the person with a disability, not through their companion or interpreter.
- Refer to a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation.
- Avoid derogatory slang or negative descriptions of a person's disability. For example, "a person who uses a wheelchair" is more appropriate than "a person confined to a wheelchair." A wheelchair is not confining—it's liberating!
- Provide information in alternate means (e.g., written, spoken, diagrams).
- Do not interact with a person's guide dog or service dog unless you have received permission to do so.
- Do not be afraid to use common terms and phrases, like "see you later" or "let's go for a walk" around people with disabilities.
- Do not touch mobility devices or assistive technology without the owner's consent.
- Do not assume physical contact, like handshakes, high-fives, or hugs are okay.
- Understand that not everyone uses eye contact.

Blind or Low Vision

- Be descriptive. Say, "The computer is about three feet to your left," rather than "The computer is over there."
- Speak all of the projected content when presenting and describe the content of charts, graphs, and pictures.
- When guiding people with visual impairments, offer them your arm rather than grabbing or pushing them.

Learning Disabilities

- Offer directions or instructions both orally and in writing. If asked, read instructions to individuals who have specific learning disabilities.

Mobility Impairments

- Consider carrying on a long conversation with an individual who has a mobility impairment from a seated position.

Speech Impairments

- Listen carefully. Repeat what you think you understand and then ask the person with a speech impairment to clarify or repeat the portion that you did not understand.

Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Face people with hearing impairments, and avoid covering your mouth, so they can see your lips. Avoid talking while chewing gum or eating.
- Speak clearly at a normal volume. Speak louder only if requested.
- Repeat questions from audience members.
- Use paper and pencil, or type things out on your cell phone, if the person who is deaf does not read lips or if more accurate communication is needed.
- When using an interpreter, speak directly to the person who is deaf; when an interpreter voices what a person who is deaf signs, look at the person who is deaf, not the interpreter.

Psychiatric Impairments

- Provide information in clear, calm, respectful tones.
- Allow opportunities for addressing specific questions.