ADVANTAGES OF SERVING PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Out of sight, but a part of the community

The old adage, "out of sight, out of mind," frequently contributes to inhibit community integration of people with disabilities. Many information providers assume, for instance, that since they do not see people who are impaired enter their libraries, there are no people with disabilities residing in their community, or if they do live in the community, they must not want or need library services. This assumption is incorrect. Although the highest per capita disability rates are seen in rural areas and among people who did not attend high school, people with disabilities that prevent them from accessing standard informational resources, such as books, journals, and computers, live and work in every community.

Some people with disabilities may not use the library because they do not realize libraries have materials and services they can access. They may be part of the generation that was not mainstreamed and therefore did not receive library instructions. They may be older adults who gradually lost their vision or developed arthritis, and found holding and reading a book difficult. They may have then become despondent and just stopped visiting their library. Those people within the library's service community who are underusing it can become active patrons through intense and on-going marketing and outreach by library staff.

Information providers should be aware that some people with disabilities may not be physically able to get to the library but are part of the growing number of people with print access disabilities that are beginning to visit the library's Web site from the comfort of their home or workplace. The library's cyber site must be as accessible to adaptive technology as the physical building is to those patrons using walkers or wheel chairs.

Libraries need to be aware of this disabled segment of the online population, because it is growing. Statisticians and population forecasters agree that as the world's population ages, the number of people with both visual and physical disabilities will surge.

To put some perspective on the special needs population, surveys and census data indicate what types of disabilities are likely to be encountered in the service population and how they are found throughout the country. The following chart, taken from a 1998 survey of Internet users by the Graphic, Visualization, & Usability Center, shows the relative distribution of the major disability classes. Vision disabilities are nearly double any other class.

More than 54 million Americans are afflicted with disabilities that can affect computer usage. The National Center for Health Statistics estimated that in 1996 these people were found in all parts of the country. For the category "Visual Impairment," for example, the distribution across the U.S. is shown in the chart following.

FACTS AND FIGURES ON BLINDNESS AND LOW VISION

- *Every seven minutes an American becomes blind or visually impaired.*
- *About 10 million blind and visually impaired people are in the United States.*
- *There are 1.3 million Americans who are legally blind.*
- *About 5.5 million older adults are blind or visually impaired.*
- *There are about 93,700 visually impaired or blind students, 10,800 of whom are deaf-blind.*
- *About 55,200 legally blind children are in the United States. About 10% of them use Braille as their primary reading medium.*
- *At least 1.5 million blind or visually impaired adults in the United States use computers.*
- *Of all blind and visually impaired Americans, 80% are white, 18% are black, and 2% are from other races.*
- *About 46% of visually impaired adult Americans are employed, and 32% of legally blind working-age Americans are employed.*
- *About 45% of people with severe visual impairments have a high school degree, compared with 80% of fully sighted people.*

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—Excerpted from American Foundation for the Blind.
"Quick Facts and Figures on Blindness and Low Vision."

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People with disabilities really want access!

During the last decade technological advancements have improved society as a whole by providing people with connectivity and instant access to a variety of information. For people without disabilities, the Internet was greeted as a vehicle to retrieve information quickly and conveniently. For those with disabilities, the Internet was seen as a way to also do those things, but, more importantly, do them independently.

Those people with an impairment that prevents them from reading standard print can register with a Network Library of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped and have access to a limited number of magazines and books on audio-tape. To learn more about the National Library Service, peruse the catalog or to locate the nearest cooperating library.

Previous to the Internet and accessible computers, people with disabilities did not have ready access to current information such as encyclopedias, almanacs, and newspapers. Now, however, access to computer technology can help people who are blind read computer screens or allow people who are deaf become aware of audible computer prompts. Hardware devices, such as ergonomically designed trackballs, allow access to people who have physical impairments of hand movement. Voice recognition systems enable people with limited physical dexterity to handle their own correspondence, surf the Internet, and gain meaningful employment. Computer mice even are available that can help people "see" diagrammed items displayed on the monitor.

Yet with all this technology available people with disabilities are still not rushing to join the computer revolution. In his report "Disability and

the Digital Divide," Dr. H. Stephen Kaye stated that only one-quarter of households of people with disabilities own a computer compared with one-half of their nondisabled counterparts. The gap in Internet use is even more skewed: less than 10% of people with disabilities connect to the Internet compared with almost 40% of those without disabilities. The reason for the gap is not because those with disabilities do not want computers and access.

Cost of equipment and telecommunications remain factors

Due to society's incorrect assumption that people who cannot see, hear, walk, talk, or touch are unemployable, many with disabilities are not employed, or are underemployed in relation to their education. Thus, this group of people has less disposable income; they might not have the funds needed to purchase computers, specialized software, or pay monthly Internet access charges.

In addition, those people without gainful employment or who do not interact with others in the mainstream may not be aware of the technology that may be able to help them.

Some people with disabilities may also have a phobia about accessing computers and fear that their disability may cause them to break the computer.

Other reasons for people with disabilities not accessing computers include many of those given by people without disabilities, but the consequences of not accessing the technology are greater. For the disabled, the Internet stands to help them gain equal access to information, education, and those items that help to develop social skills.

What can be gained from Internet access

Two major surveys were conducted to determine why people were using the Internet. The 1998 Current Population Survey and the Harris Poll (National Organization on Disability) surveyed those people using computers who have disabilities to determine if this technology made a difference in their lives. About half of those surveyed said the Internet has significantly improved their quality of life, compared with only about a one-quarter positive response for those without a disability.

Reasons given by people with disabilities in these surveys for feeling that the Internet has improved the quality of their lives include:

- 59% stated the Internet helps them feel better informed about the world.
- 44% stated the Internet helps them feel connected to the world.
- 42% stated the Internet helps them reach out to people with similar interests or experiences.
- 49% stated the Internet helps them communicate and socialize with close friends, relatives, and neighbors.
- 58% spend 16 hours or more per week on the Internet compared with 37% of those without disabilities.

- 75% use the Internet for electronic mail.

- 64% use the Internet to search for information.

- 45% use the Internet for information on news, weather, and sports

- 34% use the Internet for course or schoolwork.

- 43% use the Internet for job-related tasks.

- 22% use the Internet to shop, pay bills, etc.

- 17% use the Internet to search for jobs.

—Data extracted from "How The Internet Is Improving the Lives of Americans With Disabilities," The Harris Poll #30, June 7, 2000, and H. Stephen Kaye. "Disability and the Digital Divide." Disability Statistics Center, University of California: Disability Statistics Abstracts, July 2000/No. 22.

Libraries can help people with special needs cross the divide

Although some nondisabled people use the computer primarily as another method to gain information or to visit chat rooms, people with disabilities and older adults are using the computer as a tool to gain or retain self-sufficiency and combat isolation by gaining social integration.

That more of the population is not using the Internet is a societal travesty. There is the potential for people with disabilities, as well as seniors, to gain so much. Libraries need to provide proportionately the same tools to these groups as they do the general public. This effort includes appropriate hardware, software, training, and support in the use of these technologies, and providing an accessible Web site.

Libraries can now offer information access to all

Disability demographics indicate the minority group of disabled people is too large to ignore.

In the not too distant past, conventional libraries had little to offer people with disabilities. A few of them were able to purchase the original Kurzweil Reading Machines, others purchased Pocket Talk to use with hard-of-hearing patrons or held American Sign Language story hours for deaf children. But for most, the accessibility revolved around building a large-print collection for people with low vision.

The development of low-cost, easy-to-use adaptive hardware and software, however, has expanded the ability of libraries to provide services for people with disabilities. The technology and expansion of the World Wide Web are allowing people with disabilities to visit and access library Web sites that are accessible. Making accessibility possible gives information providers a chance to meet new patrons and develop new services.