



By: *Elise Quevedo*

Closing the digital divide: inclusion as innovation



This week, I attended "**Connected Britain**" in London. There was an impactful panel on technology and inclusion led by Top Industry Analyst Will Townsend and featuring panellists such as Glenda Cook from Glasgow City Health & Social Care Partnership and Robin Christopherson MBE from AbilityNet. However, it was his adorable service dog, Hugo, that stole the attention.

We often hear that technology brings people together and creates new opportunities, but the panellists shared facts and stories that made me realise there is still a long way to go when it comes to inclusion. And in this mega-connected world, are we still too disconnected?

Technology enables individuals with disabilities to connect with the outside world, power life-saving devices, and unlock new career opportunities.

However, some categories are excluded. We are reminded that real inclusion is still a work in progress by issues like discriminatory algorithms, inaccessible digital services, and unequal access to training.

The most important lesson learned was the disparity between the idea of a globalised world and the reality faced by its numerous inhabitants.

Inclusion in Technology

Inclusion is about making sure that everyone, regardless of background, age, gender, or ability, has the chance to engage in the digital economy. That is the goal of inclusion in technology. It is to establish systems in which innovation helps everyone, not just a select few.

Digital platforms, automation, and artificial intelligence have an impact on everything from healthcare to employment to education. These systems have the potential to worsen already-existing disparities if they are not created with inclusiveness in mind.

When technology excludes people, economies lose out on talent, businesses miss the chance to reach broader audiences, and communities remain divided

With an emphasis on accessibility and empathy, technology may empower individuals. According to Christopherson, 73% of disabled people are still unemployed, and it's not because they don't want to work.

When technology excludes people, economies lose out on talent, businesses miss the chance to reach broader audiences, and communities remain divided. Inclusion matters because it is both the right thing to do and the smart thing to do.

Improvements We Can Celebrate

Devices and services are more inclusive now than ever. Smartphones have settings that help people with vision or hearing challenges.

Voice recognition tools now better understand different accents, and AI translation apps enable people to communicate across languages instantly.

Many countries have launched programmes to provide digital skills training for underserved communities

We are now paying more attention to digital inclusion. Allegedly, Apple is the brand with the most inclusive devices.

Many countries have launched programmes to provide digital skills training for underserved communities. Some cities are investing in public Wi-Fi to reduce connectivity gaps.

Companies are increasingly aware that inclusion should be part of their core

strategies, not an afterthought.

Room For Improvement

Despite these advances, I still see many barriers remaining. Many apps and platforms are not fully accessible to people with disabilities.

Bias in AI systems, as confirmed by all panellists, continues to disadvantage certain groups, particularly in hiring and lending decisions. Rural communities and low-income families still struggle with reliable internet access.

The tech workforce also lacks diversity. Inclusion in technology begins with including more people in the teams who build it. We need a wider range of voices, from engineers to leaders, so products meet everyone's needs.

It all comes down to the way we think. One of the biggest flaws in HR recruitment methods that utilise AI to filter results is that HR AI was trained mainly online, which automatically introduces a significant bias in the answers.

Inclusion needs to be a constant focus and built into every step of how we design, develop, and use technology

Christopherson said when getting involved in projects, don't just check the answers, double-check the exact details and query the results. Many organisations want to check the "inclusion box" without any follow-up.

Cook said, in the public sector, she feels they are behind. Celebrating a few successes isn't enough. Inclusion needs to be a constant focus and built into every step of how we design, develop, and use technology.

Let me give you another example and a thought. When attending a panel titled "Tech without limits, bridging disability and digital access", where were the examples of what that

might look like? I did not see any sign language interpreters or live captioning screens to make the panel more accessible. Food for thought, huh?

Leading By Example

Microsoft has been **recognised** as a leader in inclusive hiring for over a decade, an example is its Neurodiversity Program. Their goal, and I quote, "is to ensure that all candidates, regardless of their cognitive processing styles, have an opportunity to showcase their skills and contribute to Microsoft's success."

Additionally, the business makes significant investments in **accessibility** features for all of its products, including voice commands, adaptive controllers, and screen readers.

Accenture has continuously been **rated** as one of the world's most inclusive companies. They prioritise recruiting people with disabilities, providing mentorship, and making sure their staff is representative of society's diversity. In order to increase possibilities for underrepresented groups in the technology industry, Accenture also collaborates with other organisations.

The SAP Autism at Work initiative has **established** itself as a global standard for inclusive employment. Because of their aptitude for problem-solving and pattern recognition, the organisation actively seeks out people on the spectrum. The programme has motivated other businesses to start similar projects and produced worthwhile job possibilities.

When we welcome different talents, we see more innovation. For that to happen, we need to shift the way we think on a day-to-day basis.

Tech Companies Creating Devices for Accessibility

Apple is often recognised for its **accessibility**

features. From VoiceOver, which reads what is on the screen for people with vision impairments, to hearing aid compatibility and custom vibration alerts, Apple continues to set the bar for inclusive design.

Google has **developed** several tools to enhance accessibility, including Live Transcribe, which provides real-time captioning, and Lookout, which helps people with visual impairments identify objects. Google also continues to invest in AI that can make communication and navigation easier for all.

OrCam develops wearable assistive **technology** for people who are blind or visually impaired. OrCam MyEye, their flagship product, is a small device that attaches to spectacles and can identify objects, read text aloud, and recognise faces. Many people now live more independently because of this invention. It has given many people more independence in their daily lives.

These companies are helping people gain more freedom, independence, and dignity.

Opportunities For The Future

Inclusion will be a key measure of progress in the technology sector. Governments will likely establish stricter rules to ensure AI is fair and accessible. Companies will need to show they are inclusive in real life, not just on paper, or not just innovative.



Schools will continue to integrate inclusive tools into classrooms, ensuring children of all abilities can learn and thrive together

We will see greater investment in affordable technology that bridges the digital divide, particularly in underserved regions. Schools will continue to integrate inclusive tools into classrooms, ensuring children of all abilities can learn and thrive together.

As more diverse voices enter the tech workforce, products will naturally reflect a broader range of needs and experiences.

If we focus on inclusion, we can close gaps and spark new levels of innovation that we have yet to discover.

Even though the obstacles are genuine, if we remain dedicated, we can make progress. People shouldn't be excluded by technology. It ought to unite us.

To the educators, innovators, and leaders forming the digital world, everything we create should be centred on inclusivity.

If technology exists to connect us, are we doing enough to make sure that no one is left behind? Let's work toward a future where being connected truly means everyone is included, not just another tick box on a piece of paper.