

NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

A NOTE FROM BETSY SIRK:

October is recognized as National Disability Employment Awareness Month, established to celebrate the contributions of workers with disabilities and highlight inclusive employment policies and practices. The theme for this year is *Advancing Access and Equity*. In 2023, we mark the 50th anniversary of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 – a major milestone in America’s commitment to advancing access and equity for all people. Twenty-five years later, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 were passed which strengthened Section 508 and required access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) provided by the Federal Government. In 2001, the Section 508 Technical Standards which define accessible technology were implemented, then revised in 2017 and apply to all the ICT that the Federal Government buys, builds, implements, maintains, and uses. You will often hear people use the shorthand term “508” to refer to the requirement for ICT to be accessible.

Hopefully you’ve enjoyed this background, but may be asking yourself, “Why should I care?” Many people are only interested in gaining a deeper understanding of an issue when it applies to them or someone close. That is just human nature. My hope is to raise awareness about the need for accessible technology and make it personal for everyone reading.

Accessible design is at the heart of customer experience. Accessible technology is designed to be used by everyone and improves the customer experience for all. To illustrate the benefits of accessible technology, let me draw a comparison to NASA Spinoffs, technologies developed by NASA that benefit life on Earth in the form of commercial products. Memory foam, invented by NASA-funded researchers looking for ways to keep test pilots cushioned during flights, has been used worldwide to provide personal comfort. A NASA-funded company invented the translucent ceramic used in the first “invisible” braces, a best-selling orthodontic product helping millions. NASA research to develop life support systems for Mars missions discovered a source for an omega-3 fatty acid that is now used in 90 percent of baby formulas on the market.

Just as NASA Spinoffs benefit people worldwide, accessible design has enriched everyone’s lives. Wheelchair ramps were added to buildings to provide access specifically for those with mobility impairments, yet all of us – especially parents pushing strollers – directly benefit as well. How many of us rely on captioning to enjoy videos, programs, and broadcasts because we cannot easily hear what is being said? You can thank Section 508 for the requirement, and the world-wide adoption speaks for itself.

The beauty of accessible technology lies in its universal applicability. It does not target a specific audience that requires assistive technology; you are implementing technology that interacts with whatever assistive technology an individual may use. Any one of us at any time may need assistive technology, so workplace tools must be accessible. I’m proud that NASA SEWP, as the top Government-wide Acquisition Contract, is also the only acquisition vehicle that facilitates customers obtaining essential Section 508 conformance information for the products they intend to buy. We are leading by example. Accessible technology enables mission success.

Betsy Sirk is the Director of Digital Accessibility and Strategic Sourcing. She also chairs the Industry Outreach Program under the Federal CIO Accessibility Community of Practice and is regarded as one of the country’s leading experts on Section 508.

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