

DISABILITY RIGHTS IN TURKEY: TIME FOR CHANGE

Nearly 13 percent of Turkey's population is disabled, and yet there are still leaps and bounds to be made with regard to equality, accessibility, and employment opportunities for the disabled community. From the perspective of his involvement in providing disability services in Turkey as well as around the globe, the author argues that Turkish businesses and the government need to see the value added in employing members of the disabled community, many of which have untapped skill sets. The author also emphasizes the vital importance of ending discrimination against disabled people in Turkey and providing the opportunity for their meaningful participation in public life.

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When people think of accessibility they generally think “the ease in which you access something.” It is something that most of us take for granted. Access to home, healthcare, transportation, leisure facilities, and employment, for example, are things that many of us are lucky to experience. Different countries provide differing levels of access, understanding, knowledge, implementation, and policies with regard to their disabled populations. They are also at differing stages in their disability equality legislation.

According to a disability survey by the Turkish Statistical Institute in 2002, an estimated 8.5 million disabled people live in Turkey, which is nearly 13 percent of the population.¹ And yet when I walk through Istanbul, one of the most densely populated cities in the world, I would never believe that figure because I do not see many people with disabilities on the streets, shopping, or working.

In Turkey, there is a desperate need to plan for a future society that is more inclusive. Without such a plan and its successful implementation, society in general will suffer, not just those with disabilities. This article will show why action is needed now for members of our society with disabilities, and for the future of society as a whole.

Globalization and the Business Case

Destek Technology has been delivering specialist accessibility services in Turkey since 2011. We have met with many organizations from large and small municipals, educational authorities, and corporations alike. We talk about accessibility in the physical world, the digital world, and disability equality in the workplace. However it seems that many organizations in Turkey believe providing accessible services, products, or environments is an optional extra.

Whereas, in today’s global marketplace, companies looking to access a share of the market will now have to think more inclusively. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) there are over 1 billion people worldwide with disabilities. Does it not make great business sense for industry leaders to include this huge market into their business strategies?

There is no way for a company to ensure they can reach the entirety of its intended marketplace if their current communication technologies are only designed for a specific type of person. A vast majority of Turkish company websites, for example, are inaccessible to users with disabilities. Only a certain percentage of the global population that are without disability, age, or even ability will be able to access

¹ Turkish Statistical Institute, http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/Kitap.do?metod=KitapDetay&KT_ID=11&KITAP_ID=14

these websites. Almost all Turkish company websites will fit this mold and Turkish companies must realize that to reach a broader national or global market they must think “inclusively.”

For many years, people with disabilities found accessing technology a costly business. They first had to purchase a computer with adapted keyboards or mice to suit their disabilities. Following this, assistive technology is generally needed – such as screen-reading software for blind users. This technology was expensive; the leading brand of this software typically would cost around

1,400 dollars. Then they would have needed to subscribe to an Internet Service Provider (ISP) to obtain costly broadband service. Altogether, a disabled individual would have been looking at a cost of around 3,000 dollars before being able to access technology.

Now, with new technology, this cost is dramatically lowered. A prime example of this is an iPhone or Android device, which is rapidly becoming a visually impaired user’s preferred technology. A person can usually purchase a smart phone with no upfront cost but rather smaller monthly contract payments. With the built-in accessibility features provided, most users with disabilities access these technologies, in some instances even far more quickly and accurately than those users without disabilities.

In 2013, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in the UK stated that over 77 percent of its citizens shop online for goods and services. This is also the same for users with disabilities; can you think of a better way to shop than from the comfort of your own home? If anything, a person’s disability may restrict their activities outside of the home, so to be able to shop from home is usually the preferred option. This could have likely contributed to Apple’s recent announcement of its success in surpassing 18 billion dollars in profit, for the first time in the company’s history.

A commercial business case for accessible products, services, and environments is easy to build and justify. For example, in the UK alone, disabled spending power (a statistic released by the British Government) is estimated to be in excess of 12 billion dollars per year. The disabled spending power, commonly referred to as “The Purple Pound” is so important that in August 2012 the UK Department for Work and

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Pensions brought out a guide for small to medium enterprises on “Growing your customer base to include disabled people.” Even though disabled spending power may be different for people with disabilities in Turkey, when one combines that with the amount of money family and friends spend on their disabled loved ones the case for providing accessible services in the commercial world has never been stronger.

Employment

In Turkey, the Administration of Disabled People was founded in 1997, the First National Disabled People’s Council was held in 1999, and the Disability Equality Act was introduced in 2005. Since 6 February 2014, when the Turkish Parliament approved a new legislative package on working conditions and rights of people with disabilities in Turkey, many changes were implemented. Tax reductions for companies acted as an incentive to employ people with disabilities. While the employment is compulsory, it is important to also ensure that the roles are both fulfilling and worthwhile.

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The Turkish Ministry of Labor and Social Security aimed to employ more than 30,000 disabled workers and civil servants throughout 2014, and the act states that the “Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor and Social Security has vowed to develop vocational rehabilitation training programs for people with disabilities according to work and occupational analysis.” This seems to be a giant leap forward, but it appears that the quality of employment opportunities that people with disabilities

are offered is very often poor, menial, and not suited to their abilities. The compulsory employment is meant to give people with disabilities a chance to be employed and should not be used merely to fulfill a quota. When browsing various forums or newspaper articles on the Internet it is obvious not all people with disabilities are in roles that utilize their skill sets fully.² Many people have expressed dissatisfaction with what is being offered, with some feeling the whole experience is demeaning. When speaking to people with disabilities that we have met while travelling around Turkey, this was a topic that was continually broached.

² “Engel grupları dikkate alınarak atama yapılmalı” [Assignment should be made in consideration of disability groups], *Memurlar.net*, 7 April 2013, <http://www.memurlar.net/haber/358908/>

One of the main issues challenging efforts to ensure equality for disabled people in employment is the selection processes used to hire staff. For example, once a person with a disability applies to work as a government staffer and passes the required exam (which in itself can pose challenges for the disabled), they are then parked to await deployment with their future employer. From our conversations with people with disabilities over this last year, this selection process appears to be random or carried out without in-depth knowledge of the person's disability or skill set and many people are placed in the wrong environment to begin with. In short, they are set up to fail.

Another question to ask is “what is the attitude of their fellow colleagues?” Do all the staff members within that organization understand the implications of disability?

It seems in Turkey that we, as a society, are not progressive in our approach to disabilities. A study conducted by the Administration for Disabled People on “How Society Perceives Persons with Disabilities,” stated that “(...) participants' perception on persons with disabilities was based upon incapability (...) not capability (...) participants had reflected negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities.”³ This states quite clearly, that Turkey, as a nation, has a long way to go before we all understand equality.

Inclusive employment would dictate that it is not only those members of the workforce with disabilities that need specialist training. It is only logical to ensure that inclusivity be ingrained from the CEO down through every staff member so that it is at the heart of all they do. Disability awareness is essential through all levels of an organization, indeed through all of society.

Benefits of Employing People with Disabilities

With the advancement of technology and the relatively low cost of equipment, the disabled community now has access to technology that opens up a new world of opportunity. A position in the technology industry is now commonplace for many people with disabilities. It is no longer acceptable to assume a disabled person cannot work within a technology-based environment or can only carry out manual labor.

With a disability community of 8.5 million people in Turkey, there is a large pool of resources, and it stands to reason that there will be many with valuable skill sets that would be an excellent resource for employers.

3 “How Society Perceives Persons with Disabilities,” *Administration for Disabled People*, 2009, http://www.ozida.gov.tr/ENG/data_bank/projects/HowSocietyPerceivesPersonswithDisabilities.pdf

Let's take a look at just some of the benefits of employing people with disabilities in suitable roles and environments:

- Employers will have a legal obligation to make adequate provision to the work environment. If the work environment is accessible, it will benefit everyone and help an organization correctly address Labor Act - Law No. 4857. The benefit here is to avoid costly monthly financial penalties given by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (*Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı*).
- Companies can attract talented people from a larger percentage of job seekers with a vast range of experiences. Not all knowledge and intelligence is derived from standard education. For example, not all of our staff is educated to a high degree. My fellow director left secondary school without many qualifications. It was her ambition and life experiences with disability that gave her a thirst to succeed, and she is now considered one of the leaders in her field of disability technology in the UK.
- Companies report that employees with disabilities have better retention rates, reducing the high cost of turnover.⁴
- Creating a disability-friendly workplace makes employees feel valued; this promotes greater loyalty and productivity.
- A company that has adapted its environment, policies, and attitudes to disabilities is “future proofing” itself to deal with our changing and aging society.

A Little Bit of Knowledge...

All municipalities within Turkey are obligated to provide disabled access to public transportation vehicles and other common areas like subways, metros, and buses by July 2018 (a three-year extension from previous legislation). All disability acts of law must be monitored and policed by those with in-depth knowledge in relation to policy, whether it be in education, employment, healthcare, etc.

I have seen examples in which a combination of best intentions but limited knowledge has produced poor results. Examples of poor implementation can be found in the use of tactile markings. Tactile markings are used on pavements as a guide for visually impaired people and are a prime example of where limited knowledge can be a dangerous thing. My business partner and I were incredibly dismayed when we visited the new Marmaray train crossing the Bosphorus and discovered

⁴ Lorna Adams and Katie Oldfield, “Opening up work: The views of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions,” *Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report*, 2012.

tactile markings that could lead a visually impaired person to walk completely off the platform. There are many more examples of poor implementation such as a visually designed pavement in Çankaya that will direct people to walk into the pavement wall, every few hundred feet.

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To avoid these literal and figurative pitfalls, Turkey should look to other countries for best-practice implementation. We have the chance to learn from neighboring countries to ensure we do not make the same mistakes. And while there are many worthwhile Turkish projects that bear fruitful results, knowledge transfer does not only happen within government or EU-funded projects. It is essential that commercial organizations bear some of this responsibility and look to solve access issues themselves in accordance with their own Equal Employment Opportunity and Accessibility Policies.

In my opinion, it is also essential to consult with disability groups within Turkey that are offering their help and guidance. These voices should be heard. Consulting people from logistically diverse disability groups will provide useful information on how they perceive their current environments and what they believe is disabling them.

One message is simple: a clear direction is needed from government. If laws are implemented, then they must be policed. Each organization, each company, each municipality, and each citizen must also play a role in enabling our society and actively changing the way we perceive disabilities. Change can only happen if all of society is behind it.

“Be not afraid of changing slowly, be afraid only of standing still” – Rumi