

IEEE and STC Ethical Guidelines Call for Fairness on Disabilities and Accessibility

Dan Voss

Note: This is a guest article the author was invited to write for the April 2006 online newsletter of the IEEE Professional Communication Society (PCS), in which the AccessAbility SIG encourages its IEEE professional counterparts with an interest in accessibility to form a similar special interest group, affiliate with us, and create a mutually beneficial synergy. With the permission of IEEE, the article is reprinted in these Proceedings in support of the AccessAbility SIG's informational session on Leadership Day and to encourage cooperation between the two professional organizations in the pursuit of accessibility both in communication products and in general.



STC's [AccessAbility Special Interest Group \(SIG\)](#) is committed to improving accessibility in technical communication products and in general.**

My colleague and friend Fabien Vais and I were conducting an onsite “inspection” of the spectacular glass-ceilinged atrium of a major luxury hotel the day before the annual international conference of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), gathering information for a short supplement to the 19-page [accessibility guide](#) that STC’s Special Needs Committee* had published—the first of five such publications from 2002-2006—to help ensure a positive conference experience for attendees with disabilities and special needs.

We stood three feet above an enticing open-air café whose tables were nestled beneath the canopy of the indoor rain forest that filled the center of the atrium. Around us rippled an explosion of sights and sounds—cascading waterfalls tumbling over rocks, babbling brooks wending their way through lush foliage, jungle birds screeching and chattering.

All that separated us from this delightful little eatery were three steps. But for somebody in a wheelchair, it may as well have been three miles.

Since the facility was ADA-approved as “fully accessible,” we looked around confidently for the ramp that would provide us access.

Since the facility was ADA-approved as “fully accessible,” we looked around confidently for the ramp that would provide us access. There was none. I proceeded down the steps, found the manager of the café, and asked him how my companion could access this fully accessible facility. After a couple of hurried phone calls,

he gave us directions that would provide access to the restaurant.

Fifteen minutes later, after traversing a circuitous path through the inner recesses of the hotel, including a storage area and a kitchen, we finally made it back to the patio of the café—having covered approximately 300 yards to negotiate the three-foot drop.

Surprising? Not really. This hotel, like many others, was fully compliant with the letter of the law. Further inspection of the premises revealed poor signage that partially negated a considerable investment in accessibility ramps throughout the sprawling atrium and created an accessibility “cul de sac,” leading visitors past an unmarked elevator down a long plushly carpeted corridor—try negotiating deep carpet in a wheelchair sometime!—ending up with six steps and no nearby elevator or ramp.

* Now the AccessAbility SIG.

** *The Wind Beneath Your Wings*
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Experiences like this during my 7-year association with the committee, which has subsequently grown into an international special interest group for disabilities advocacy and accessibility ([STC's AccessAbility SIG](#)), have taught me how wide the gulf can be that separates legality and ethics when it comes to disabilities and accessibility.

A detailed discussion of legality and ethics is beyond the scope of this brief article. To provide a basic ethical framework, let's draw upon the ethical guidelines of IEEE and STC. Tenet #8 in the [IEEE Code of Ethics](#) calls for members "... to treat fairly all persons regardless of such factors as race, religion, gender, disability, age, or national origin."¹ And Tenet #5 of the [STC Ethical Guidelines](#), "Fairness," specifies that "we respect cultural variety and other aspects of diversity in our clients, employers, development teams, and audience."²

Let's zero in on diversity in employment and fairness in general. Here are some of the thorny questions that result. Notice that only questions, not answers, are provided. That is deliberate! ☺

Q1. Is it fair that more than half of employable people of working age who have disabilities do not have a job?

"More than 17 million working-age individuals [in the U.S.] have a self-reported disability that limits work. Their unemployment rate is also twice as high as for those without a work disability."³

"... there were 11.3 million working-age adults (18 to 64) with disabilities [in the U.S.], of whom 37 percent were working in 1994-1995."⁴

What, exactly, governs "reasonable accommodation"?

Q2. On the other hand, is it fair to compel a small business to install special equipment to enable it to hire an employee with a disability? And how much can the business reasonably be expected to invest in such accommodations? What, exactly, governs "reasonable accommodation"?

Q3. Is it fair to deny someone with a hearing or visual disability full access to the sessions at a professional conference?

Q4. On the other hand, is it fair for one attendee at such a conference who has a specific disability to demand costly special accommodations by threatening litigation under the ADA, when attendees with other disabilities receive little or no special accommodations? How much can an organization reasonably be expected to expend to ensure accessibility at its events? Again, what, exactly, governs "reasonable accommodation"?

Q5. Is it fair to compel the operator of a privately owned commercial web site to make the site fully accessible to

users with visual or hearing impairments, thereby increasing the cost of the site and possibly also the price of the product(s) it is marketing?

Q6. On the other hand, is it fair to consciously disenfranchise a significant minority of the population from what is rapidly becoming the dominant information medium of commerce, education, and culture?

Consider this rather chilling statistic comparing the degree to which government (public) and private enterprises have provided accommodations for three of the most widely occurring disabilities⁵:

Disability	Private	Public
Wheelchair access	82%	95%
Computer access, hearing-impaired	43%	91%
Computer access, visually impaired	37%	77%

The private sector clearly has made much more progress in the case of the most visible disability—mobility restrictions—than it has on the other two (which comprise the web site issue).

Resolving such difficult questions on disabilities and accessibility demands a delicate balance of ethics, law, technology, and economics—the fulcrum of which is the principle of fairness. Finding appropriate solutions without compromising that principle demands both a broad base of knowledge and intuitive common sense and a spirit of fairness with which to apply that knowledge.

One of the best ways to marshal such knowledge and judgment is via a forum of professional communicators who share an interest both in helping colleagues with disabilities in the practice of our profession and also in helping *all* communicators develop information products that are fully accessible to end users with disabilities.

STC's AccessAbility SIG is one such forum. For a brief overview of its history, charter, objectives, and accomplishments, refer to ["From Starfish to Butterfly: the Amazing Story of the AccessAbility SIG,"](#)^{5b} from the *Proceedings* to STC's 52nd annual conference.

If such an organization exists within the IEEE PCS, we are keenly interested in joining forces by sharing e-media such as web sites, online newsletters, and listservs. If such an organization does *not* presently exist within the IEEE PCS, the AccessAbility SIG encourages fellow communicators who share our goals to consider forming such a group, and we offer our services as mentors in the process.

Either way, if you are interested in the issue of ethics and accessibility, please consider yourselves cordially invited to informally affiliate yourselves with us via an electronic guest "membership." In keeping with our goal of universal accessibility, all of the SIG's forums, e-media, and archives are fully accessible—there are no STC or SIG membership restrictions. As much as any organization needs membership dues, we value allies in our cause more highly.



The ethics of accessibility compel us to focus not on what can't be achieved but what can.

We invite you to help us deal with the kind of complex issues described in this article that are addressed almost daily on our [listserv](#). You will find a wealth of resources on disabilities and accessibility at our [SIG web site](#), which includes the archives of our [online newsletter Achieve!](#) as well as articles, presentations, and collateral materials from accessibility-related sessions at our [international conference](#).

The challenge of achieving fairness in providing accessibility and equal opportunity for people with disabilities is significant. But working together, professionals who care can make a difference.

This calls to mind the compelling story with which our SIG's founder, Judy Skinner, who battled back from a near-fatal auto accident in 1997, ends her [landmark paper](#) for the *Proceedings to STC's 47th Annual International Conference*, "My Brain Works ... My Legs Don't: Let's Take the 'Dis' out of 'Disabilities'":

"I'm reminded of the story about the beach strewn with starfish and the little girl picking them up and throwing them back in the ocean.

'Little girl,' a passer-by said, 'what are you doing?'

'I'm saving starfish,' she replied.
'But there are so many! Your efforts can't possibly make a difference.'

As she picked up another starfish, the little girl said, 'It makes a difference to that one.'

We ask you to help us make a difference."

REFERENCES

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Dan Voss

Communications Manager, Tactical Missiles – Orlando
Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control
5600 Sand Lake Road, Orlando, FL 32819
407-356-6508
daniel.w.voss@lmco.com

DAN VOSS has 28 years' experience in aerospace at [Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control](#) and he has also taught high school and college. He is a Fellow in the [Society for Technical Communication](#) and is a member of [STC's Orlando Chapter](#), where he has been extensively involved in [educational outreach](#) initiatives. Voss managed [STC's AccessAbility SIG](#) for 2 years and remains an active leader. He served on STC's Professionalism, Certification, and Strategic Planning committees and co-authored the Society's Ethical Guidelines. He has presented at 17 international and 9 regional STC conferences. With Lori Allen, he co-authored *Ethics in Technical Communication: Shades of Gray* (Wiley, 1997) and has published numerous articles. Voss earned three of Lockheed Martin's top awards for communication and excellence for his leadership on a successful major proposal and marketing campaign, and is the only non-engineer to receive the company's Author-of-the-Year Award.