

Dealing With Special Mobility Needs: A Lesson in Patience and Coping

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A great deal has been done over the years to make the lives of people with special needs easier. However, a great deal more needs to be done. This is an article about the special mobility needs of a career technical communicator.

Through personal anecdotes and observations, the author establishes the point that the only way to really treat people with special needs fairly is to actually sit with them and understand what they are going through.

Governments and private enterprises have come a long way in making our environment more accessible to people with special needs. Most importantly, there seems to be a much greater awareness of those special needs.

Most shopping malls and busy streets have at least a few parking spaces reserved for handicapped drivers. Many public buildings are equipped with ramps designed to accommodate those confined to wheelchairs. In many cities, public transportation is now available for people in wheelchairs, either in modern regular “platform” city buses, or in specially equipped mini-buses. Automatic doors (either with sensors or with a push-button) are now fairly common in most large stores and many other buildings. Many large venues such as stadiums even have a reserved elevator for wheelchairs. More and more places are converting their restrooms to include at least one that is wheelchair-accessible. Braille buttons in elevators and ringing traffic lights are also becoming more common these days for blind people. Many hotels and apartment complexes now have units specially adapted for people in a wheelchair, with low plugs and switches, wide doorways, space under the sink, etc.

However, there is still much to do in equal access for people with special needs, especially in the area of *understanding* what our real special needs are.

HAVING A SPECIAL MOBILITY NEED BUT NOT USING A WHEELCHAIR

Growing up, I have often realized that not much is done for people who have mobility problems, but who don't happen to use a wheelchair. Too often, the term *handicapped* is synonymous with *being in a wheelchair*. After all, the international symbol for handicapped access (or disabled, or people with special needs, or whatever the politically correct term is) is a stylized wheelchair.

I would like to describe here my own “special need”.

I had polio at the age of two, while still living in Tunisia, my country of birth. Mine was the only case of polio in the whole country, so I can't blame an epidemic, just the luck of the draw! My illness initially affected my whole body, but quickly stabilized to my legs only. Today, I wear a full leg brace and walk with the help of two canes. When I need to walk long distances or stand for long periods of time, I use a wheelchair. I learned from doctors that today polio is considered a “dead disease”, meaning that there's no research any more for any cure to this disease. On the good side, my condition is completely stable, having never deteriorated in the last 45 years.

I have difficulty walking for a long time, or in deep snow (an icy sidewalk petrifies me!), or soft sand, and since I have to use two canes, I also find it hard to carry anything heavy or that does not have a handle. For example, carrying a pizza box can be tricky! I am able to go up and down a staircase, although this is much more difficult if there is no banister on my left side.

A LESSON IN PATIENCE

One thing I learned a long time ago is that by having special mobility needs, I have truly learned patience and coping techniques. Since most physically able people probably have no clue what I am referring to, let me explain myself.

I can think of two particular areas where a lot of **patience** is required – public transportation and public events.

If I need to use public transportation to get around, I have to use a designated taxi or mini-bus for my ride. Not only do I have to comply with the dispatcher's tight schedule, but also I usually have to spend up to 30-40 minutes waiting on the phone to get the line, then for my request to be registered and confirmed. Then, as if that wasn't enough, I have to wait for my ride. They tell me to be ready a half-hour before the scheduled time, but I know very well that the taxi or bus can be up to a half-hour late as well. As a matter of fact, they tell me NOT to call them unless the ride is AT LEAST 30 minutes late, which often happens. Of course, there are also times when the ride is much more than 30 minutes late...like 1 or 2 hours!!! Do you know how frustrating it is to have to vacate a place that needs to close their doors, and have to wait in the street for a taxi that was supposed to be there an hour and a half ago, AND NOT BE ABLE TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT? Do you have any idea how difficult it is to plan to meet people somewhere when you are totally dependent on a mini-bus to pick you up on time? And forget about leaving a place earlier than expected. I

would still have to wait for my ride! And if I happen to not be ready when the taxi or mini-bus comes, the driver is instructed to wait for a minute or two, and then leave without me! I've tried complaining, screaming, and fighting. It doesn't help much. Waiting, waiting, waiting. It seems that I often have no choice.

Another area where a good dose of patience is required is arriving early at a public event (or even at a party...). Two things force me to always arrive early at theatres, baseball games, or concerts. First, as explained above, I am often at the mercy of adapted public transportation for my ride, so if I don't want to miss the beginning of the play, movie, or ball game, I have to calculate my arrival time early enough, and leave some leeway for the bus being late. The second thing is that I try very hard to avoid moving crowds. By getting there early, I am almost sure to avoid being pushed by the crowd, and I can take my time getting to my seat without risking falling over people in the next row. However, arriving early at a public event also means waiting until the event starts, and perhaps also waiting for my friends to come and sit beside me. After all, they don't have to get there early. Finally, having to be there ahead of everyone often makes me feel awkward and *different*.

I can also think of many areas where I have learned to **cope**. I have described here a few cases close to my heart.

I won't talk about the impossibility of buying clothes off the shelf that fit me without having to tailor them. That is too obvious, but I will talk about boots. It is extremely frustrating to look for warm winter boots large enough to fit *over* my shoes. It seems that boot manufacturers have forgotten that many people simply CANNOT remove their shoes to slip boots on in winter. The best I can usually find are thin rubber boots, so my feet always get cold when I walk outdoors in winter.

Another thing that frustrates me are slippery floors. Macdonald's restaurants almost always have extremely treacherous tile floors. One day, I had a shouting argument with the restaurant manager following my fall on his floor. I made sure everyone in the restaurant heard my side of the story.

Another day, I had an incident at Concordia University, where I teach in Montreal. It was a rainy day, and the lobby (shiny, waxed, black ceramic tiles) was extremely slippery. On a distance of hardly 10 feet, I managed to slip four times! I just couldn't stay standing up. My canes kept on slipping, sending my briefcase flying in one direction and my legs in another! I was getting not only frustrated but also angry about this situation. I learned later that the university maintenance people don't put carpets down in this area until winter starts. Rain is not enough justification for carpets. Again, I screamed and complained, to no avail. I was asked to fill out an accident report (probably for the university to protect itself against any lawsuit). I didn't bother.

Another thing that frustrates me is reserved parking spaces. I wish I could give people a ticket sometimes! I get very annoyed at people who occupy (without a permit) a reserved parking space "for just five minutes". I have on occasion blocked someone illegally parked in a reserved space. When I came back to my car, the guy was fuming...! I just smiled at him and took my time...

When I see a free "regular" parking space next to a reserved parking space, I usually take the regular space and leave the reserved space for someone else who needs it. It seems to be common sense.

Finally, I have to tell you about another experience I had to cope with several years ago. When I decided to learn how to drive, I (ignorantly) thought my only choice was to have manual controls installed in a car. I had no trouble finding a driving school to provide me with an adapted car, learned to drive quite well, and passed my driving license test with flying colours. When I bought my first car, I had similar manual controls installed, and I have loved driving ever since. With time, however, I slowly got used to using my foot to accelerate, still using the manual brake with my hand. Before long, I never used the manual accelerator, and I started to practise braking with my foot too. I spent hours practicing pivoting my foot between both pedals of my automatic car, until I felt comfortable using only the car gas and brake pedals. I still kept the manual controls as backup.

However, one day, I decided to get rid of the manual controls, for two reasons. Firstly, other people driving my car had a hard time using the car pedals, the steel levers interfering with their movements. Secondly, since I had now trained myself to drive any automatic car, I too wanted to be able to drive other peoples' car, and even rent a car if I felt like it. Therefore, I set out to have my driving license modified to remove the restriction attached to it.

This process took ONE YEAR!!!

At first, the vehicle bureau told me it was impossible to *remove* a restriction, and that usually people call only to *add* them! When I insisted, they told me that it couldn't be done, and that I would need a doctor's approval. As I explained earlier, polio is considered a "dead disease", and therefore, I wasn't followed by any doctor, besides a G.P. who wouldn't know anything about polio. The vehicle bureau refused to budge and repeated that it would be impossible without a doctor's approval. I even asked them to give me another driving test, on a regular car, but they refused.

So, I set out to find a doctor in a rehabilitation centre. I explained my situation to him, and he too couldn't understand why I would want to get rid of these manual controls. Finally, I told him that to make things easier, I could drive his own personal car in the parking lot, to prove to him what I was saying. To this day, I just cannot imagine how I managed to convince this doctor to let me do this, but he accepted. It didn't help that this rich doctor had a huge half-mile long car, with power steering, power brakes, etc.

and this made me even more nervous. I don't know whether he was scared I would damage his car, or whether he saw that I was an excellent driver, but he soon asked me to park his car and signed the form I had brought.

With this, I returned to the vehicle bureau and waved my form in their face and DEMANDED that they modify my driving license. Again, this process took over a year before I finally received my new driving license. Talk about frustration!

THE SOLUTION: UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE'S SPECIAL NEEDS

If only people tried to understand our special needs, many of the situations described above would never arise. It is not enough to cater to people in a wheelchair; you have to deal with all people with special needs, and this takes a change in attitude.

For example, many years ago, city officials in Montreal decided to add a slope to every street corner, claiming it would be easier for people in a wheelchair who reach the curb. And it was! Today most cities in North America have done the same thing. However, in Montreal, this move was obviously at first done without consulting too many people, because blind people began complaining about these slopes. It seems that when they got to a street corner, they didn't know where the sidewalk ended and the road began! The city had made a smooth continuous slope so that there was no difference in levels between the sidewalk and the road. So the city gradually tore up all the slopes, made new ones, and kept a one-inch height at the end. This satisfied people in a wheelchair, and now blind people could tell when they reached the edge of the sidewalk.

There is a relatively new small building in Montreal (this building is an annex to a major hospital) where a beautiful ramp for wheelchairs was designed as soon as the building was built. However, the architects must have forgotten to consult anyone about this, since at the top of that ramp is a landing, with a huge and heavy door opening outward, and on top of that, a small step up to enter the building! I challenge anyone in a wheelchair to get into that building without any assistance!

In many places also, a short ramp is often added in a place where it is impossible to respect the prescribed slope angle of the ramp. The result is a very steep ramp, much too steep for anyone in a wheelchair to negotiate by himself. Again, consultation could avoid this situation.

CONSTRUCTIVE COMPLAINING

I suggest that everyone should exercise some degree of constructive complaining, not just people with special

needs. For example, everyone should complain about a slippery floor, not just if you slip on it. My wife makes it a point to always complain about the lack of wheelchair accessible restrooms in any restaurant that doesn't have one. And if the only restrooms are upstairs or downstairs, she complains even louder!

If someone without a permit takes a reserved parking space, speak up, even if you don't need the space for yourself.

If you know someone who is having a hard time integrating the workforce simply because he or she has a special need, speak up and try to help, or tell that person about the STC Special Needs Committee.

THE STC SPECIAL NEEDS COMMITTEE

The STC Special Needs Committee was formed about a year ago. Its mission is to help STC members with special needs achieve their potential by making available to them information about products, services, and literature that can assist them in their career activities. Examples of "special needs" include speech recognition, software, Braille keyboards, improved wheelchair access, or a TTD business line.

If you need help with your special needs, ask your chapter president about who to contact at the Special Needs Committee, or contact the Committee Manager, Judy Skinner – By telephone at (940) 464-3300, or by e-mail at judy.skinner@juno.com.

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Fabien Vais is an independent consultant with over 20 years' experience as a technical writer, editor, publisher, translator, and teacher. He is a senior member of the STC. He was the Newsletter Editor, Vice-president, and finally President (1994-95) of the STC Montreal Chapter. Today, he is Education Coordinator and involved in programmes. He is one of the founding members of the STC Special Needs Committee. He has attended five international conferences, and was one of the panellists making a presentation on the Special Needs Committee at STC's 47th Annual Conference, in Orlando.