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Ready Access to Information for People with Disabilities

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Access to information is not just a nice idea, it can mean a person's job!

National Industries for the Blind, together with its 88 affiliates nationwide, works to create, sustain and improve jobs for people who are blind or visually impaired. Electronic information is a major part of nearly everyone's job and this has produced both opportunities and obstacles for blind workers.

Hospital switchboard operators need to find staff and patient phone numbers in computerized directories; service representatives need to look up product information in computerized catalogs; attorneys and judges need to research law libraries and deal with court documents; many persons use the Internet to track down all sorts of information.

These and many more jobs are being done by people who are blind, using computers equipped with speech, Braille or large print displays. These special accessories are called "access technology," "assistive technology," or "adaptive technology."

Information needs to be not only accessible, but READILY accessible. This means if most people can get to it with just a mouse click or 2, it should not take a blind person 6 or 8 keystrokes to do the same thing. When information is READILY accessible then a person with a disability is as productive and competitive as everyone else.

The biggest and costliest barrier to accessibility is at the interface between the human and the machine. By taking into account the need to accommodate different modes of presentation and interaction, we simplify the problem, and the earlier this is done in the hardware and software design stage, the easier and less costly it becomes. Much effort and money is being spent by computer hardware and software developers to smooth out this interface. Perhaps one day it will be as easy to change the mode of operating a computer or other electronic device as it is to shift gears in a car.

But access technology is only part of the solution. There are tools and guidelines to help us ensure that documents, Web pages and other information products are created in a way that can be shared with others who need (or simply prefer) a different mode of presentation.

Everyone who deals with information needs to be aware of these tools and how to use them if they want to reach the widest possible audience.