

# **‘Empowering disabled people with information about assistive technology’**

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## **Introduction**

I am delighted to be here this morning, particularly because I believe that real progress can be made in groups like SPARC that can share the expertise and creativity of users, providers and developers.

### **What is the 'disabled pound' worth?**

Let's start by thinking about the power of disabled people as customers in the marketplace. There seem to be quite a lot of us, around 20% according to Grundy. (1)

This means that every fifth customer for mainstream goods and services should be a disabled person and we more or less monopolise assistive technology. Getting closer to home, blind people should be highly esteemed and valued customers. We should be the twentieth customer at every mainstream till and the fifth at every assistive till.

If I'm so important, why can't I find really good, really usable:

screen readers for doing my work and keeping abreast of what's going on?  
portable GPS navigators to replace Voss, my late lamented guide dog  
mobile phones that will tell me what's on their visual displays?

### **Inclusion by integrating and addressing disabling barriers**

Blind people aren't alone in wanting to choose and use inclusive, mainstream and assistive technology. When questioned (2), twenty people with differing impairments pointed out that they didn't just need inclusive products, they wanted them at mainstream quality, reliability and price.

There are enough disabled people to influence the market but our position could be undermined if industry thinks that our needs are complicated and difficult to satisfy.

I understand this point of view because, initially, I couldn't see how to combine and address all the different barriers against people with different impairments. Then, one day, I began putting the barriers into a simple sequence that we all seem to follow whenever we use things, the 'Five Keys to Inclusion' (3).

### **The 'Five Keys to St Mary's'**

Non-inclusive access and communication don't just block disabled people, they can block anyone. In itself, St Mary's is a pretty accessible setting but if I'd used my cane to get here instead of taking the easy way and coming by cab, I would have had a lot of problems.

Let's use the five keys to find out if anyone else shares any of my problems. None of us could use St Mary's today if we couldn't first:

Find it  
(how was the travel and wayfinding information)

Reach it  
(How are the access, layouts and parking?)

Understand how to make it work  
(Is the information and signage good?)

Relate to it  
(Do you feel welcome, included and able to give of your best?)

Interact with it successfully  
(Can you see, hear, understand and find out what you want?)

Communication barriers often make it difficult for me to find things, to understand how they work and to interact with them.

People with and without other impairments will find other keys difficult to 'turn'.

If the mainstream world was more inclusive, we would need less assistive technology to overcome its barriers. I'll leave it to you to work out what to call the assistive technology that we would need to overcome any barriers in non-inclusive assistive technology itself!

### **Information and Empowerment**

I'm going to finish by moving on from using things to choosing them effectively.

As a blind person, I know that I can only choose effective, usable, good value assistive technology if I can find the information I need about it.

I want to know exactly:

what's available?

what does it do?

how does it do it?

what do users with impairments like mine think about it?

This information wouldn't just empower me to choose more wisely.

It could also:

alert manufacturers to the comparative strengths and weaknesses of their products  
help them to develop their business plans accordingly.

help providers to choose wisely, effectively and economically!

The technology for systematic choice and innovation is already here (4).  
It's adoption might well enable to market for mainstream and inclusive technology to work more effectively.

**References:**

- 1 Grundy, E et al, 1999, 'Disability in Great Britain', Research Report No. 94, Corporate Document Services, London, ISBN 1 – 84123 –
- 2 Mitchell, J et al, 2009, 'It's wonderful – it's so ordinary!: Disabled home users evaluation of the i-House', Ergonova, Sheffield
- 3 Mitchell, J et al, 2005, The Sheffield Formula for Inclusion, , Include 3, The Helen Hamlyn Institute, RCA, London
- 4 Mitchell, J et al, , 2000, 'Autonomy for Disabled People: the need for systematic choice and innovation', Contemporary Ergonomics 2000, Taylor and Francis, London, pp 375-380