

Vodacom Group Accessibility and Disability Inclusion Guide

THE POWER OF INCLUSION: ADVANCING ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY



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Preface



DR KAREN SMIT (PhD)
Accessibility Lead, Vodacom Group

"Connecting the world means nothing if we leave persons with disabilities behind."

This publication brings together the lessons we have learned across our African footprint, the progress we have made, and the work that still lies ahead. It reflects a belief we hold strongly: that Africa can lead, not follow, in inclusive innovation.

It's about using technology to open doors for people too often left in the dark. When we design for the margins in our context, we create solutions that are more resilient, more relevant, and ultimately better for everyone.

In my role, organisations often ask where to start. The answer is simple yet powerful: start by listening, start by including, and start by acting. You do not need perfect conditions or unlimited resources to begin. Some of the most impactful innovations in Africa have emerged from constraints—where purpose, creativity, and inclusion intersect.

This guide shares Vodacom's journey to promote accessible technology and services. Technology is a bridge. For a person with a disability, a smartphone or other device is not merely a gadget. It is a voice, a set of eyes, a pair of ears, and a key to independence.

As you engage with these pages, I invite you to reflect on your organisation's role—particularly in the African context. Whether you are operating locally or globally, whether you are just beginning or accelerating your journey, we hope this guide offers both inspiration and practical guidance.

More importantly, I hope it affirms a powerful truth: inclusion is not optional—it is essential to Africa's future. When Africa is accessible, it thrives. When we design for inclusion, we design for humanity.

This is not a finished story. It is an evolving one—shaped by collaboration across Vodacom, the Vodafone Group, our partners, and the communities we serve across Africa. I am immensely proud of how far we have come, while remaining keenly aware of the responsibility to go further.

I hope this story inspires you to build a more inclusive world in which technology belongs to all of us.

With deep pride and gratitude,
Karen Smit

CEO Statement



SHAMEEL JOOSUB
Group Chief Executive Officer, Vodacom Group

Inclusion is ultimately about people. It is about dignity and opportunity, and about ensuring that every person can participate fully in society, regardless of their circumstances or abilities. It is also about recognising that accessibility and inclusion are fundamental human rights, not privileges or acts of goodwill.

For businesses, this carries a profound responsibility. We have the ability to influence how people experience the world, how opportunities are created and how barriers are removed. Organisations that embrace diversity and inclusion are not only stronger and more innovative, but also better equipped to understand the needs of the communities they serve whilst creating sustainable value.

This Guide is therefore about much more than Vodacom Group's own journey. It is intended as a practical resource for organisations across Africa and beyond that seek to translate their commitments into meaningful outcomes. It demonstrates that accessibility and inclusion are not separate from business strategy but integral to responsible leadership and long-term success.

We recognise that no organisation has all the answers. Progress requires continuous learning, sincerely listening to persons with disabilities, challenging assumptions and adapting as expectations, technologies and societies continue to evolve. It also requires collaboration, because lasting change cannot be achieved by any one organisation acting alone.

Our ambition as Vodacom Group is to positively impact 50 million lives across Africa by 2030, and to help build a future in which inclusion is not treated as an afterthought, but as a natural and essential part of how businesses operate and contribute to society.

As a purpose-led organisation committed to connecting for a better future, I hope this Guide encourages leaders to look beyond compliance, consider the experiences of those they serve, and identify practical opportunities to make a difference.

Every organisation, regardless of its size or sector, has a role to play. Ultimately, the true measure of inclusion is not what we say or promise, but the difference we make to people's lives daily.

That is the responsibility we share and the opportunity before us as we continue working towards a more inclusive world for all.

Shameel Joosub

Foreword



AYMAN ESSAM
Group Chief Officer External Affairs, Vodacom Group

Meaningful inclusion is not measured by the strength of an organisation's commitments, but by how those commitments translate into people's everyday experiences. It is about removing barriers, expanding opportunities and ensuring that persons with disabilities can participate fully and equally in society.

At Vodacom, we recognise that achieving this requires more than good intentions. Inclusion must become integral to how an organisation thinks, makes decisions and operates. It calls for leadership, accountability and a willingness to challenge established practices that may unintentionally exclude people.

Often, it is the smallest details that make the greatest difference. The language we use, how we define disability, the accessibility of our products and services, and the way we engage with customers and employees all shape an organisational culture in which people feel respected, valued and empowered.

These considerations are especially important in Africa, where barriers to accessibility can exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities. As a business that connects millions of people across the continent, we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to help address these challenges.

This Guide reflects our belief that inclusion must be practical, measurable and embedded. By sharing experiences, lessons and examples from across Vodacom, we hope to demonstrate how organisations can translate principles into meaningful progress.

We also recognise that lasting change requires partnerships. Businesses, governments, civil society and communities all have a role to play in advancing accessibility, protecting human rights and creating opportunities for greater participation. Our journey continues to evolve, shaped by the experiences of persons with disabilities and our commitment to listen, learn and improve.

Ultimately, inclusion succeeds when it becomes part of an organisation's culture, rather than an initiative operating alongside it. That is how we can create lasting change and help build a society where everyone can thrive.

In the spirit of inclusion
Ayman Essam

Overview of the Guide

This Guide provides an overview of Vodacom's journey to promote the participation of persons with disabilities in society by embedding accessibility across the company's structure, policies and processes. Our inclusion approach recognises persons with disabilities as first-class citizens, enabling us to recognise Africans with disabilities as a viable segment of society.

Purpose of the Guide

1. Provide best-practice examples of promoting accessibility.
2. Share learning, challenges and practical guidance.
3. Demonstrate that persons with disabilities are a viable consumer segment.
4. Inspire organisations across all sectors to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities.
5. Implement accessibility to improve customer and employee experiences.
6. Encourage collaboration and partnerships to enhance economic empowerment



Accessibility and Inclusion:
From Commitment to Meaningful Participation

Accessibility is more than removing barriers; it is about creating opportunities, recognising potential and ensuring that persons with disabilities can participate fully and equally in society.

For businesses, this requires a fundamental shift in perspective. Disability inclusion should not be viewed primarily as a compliance obligation or an act of social responsibility. It is a human rights imperative, but also an opportunity to reach underserved markets, unlock talent, strengthen innovation and contribute to more inclusive economic growth.

Across Africa, millions of persons with disabilities continue to face barriers to accessing essential services, employment, technology and economic opportunities. These barriers are not always physical, but can be embedded in organisational policies, digital platforms, everyday processes and, importantly, attitudes and assumptions about what persons with disabilities can achieve.

Meaningful inclusion begins when organisations recognise that accessibility is not an additional consideration, but an essential part of how they serve people and create value. As technology reshapes how Africans live, work and connect, businesses have both an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure that progress does not leave people behind. This calls for practical solutions, informed by experience, supported by leadership and embedded throughout an organisation.

Vodacom's accessibility and disability inclusion journey offers valuable lessons in translating this commitment into practice. It also shows that progress is an ongoing process of listening, learning, adapting, and collaborating.

This Guide shares those experiences and insights to encourage organisations, regardless of their size or sector, to advance accessibility and inclusion in ways that are meaningful, sustainable and measurable.

Ultimately, inclusion is measured not by what an organisation puts in place, but by the difference it makes to people's ability to participate, contribute, and thrive.

Persons with disabilities are part of society

EMPLOYEES



CITIZENS



CONSUMERS





What is accessibility?

Accessibility is the practice of making products, services, devices, environments, processes and technologies meaningful and usable to as many people as possible. It ensures that all people—regardless of ability—can access the information or services you provide.

Accessibility ensures that persons with disabilities can access opportunities. It is about removing barriers so that people with disabilities can access, use, and benefit from environments, products, services, information, and technology on an equal basis with others. Examples include websites that work with screen readers, accessible buildings with ramps, and built-in accessibility features in technology.

KEY QUESTION:
Can persons with disabilities access and use this?

Embedding accessibility into organisations' systems and processes is a human rights and development matter, as it intersects with all sectors of society, including technology, transport and infrastructure, health, financial inclusion, education, social development, the environment, justice, media, the arts and employment.

What is Disability Inclusion?

Disability Inclusion is broader and aims to ensure that persons with disabilities are fully welcomed, valued, respected, and able to participate meaningfully in all aspects of society. It focuses on belonging, participation, and equity. Examples include recruiting and promoting employees with disabilities, including persons with disabilities in decision-making processes, and ensuring they can contribute, lead, and influence outcomes.

KEY QUESTION:
Are persons with disabilities meaningfully included and able to participate

A simple analogy is that accessibility is opening the door, while inclusion is inviting people in, listening to them, and ensuring they feel they belong.

Use of the terms Accessibility and Disability Inclusion

In the African context, disability inclusion is the more widely used term across policies, rights advocacy, and continental frameworks, whereas accessibility is regarded as a key component of disability inclusion.

Promoting accessibility focuses on removing barriers across environments, products, services, technologies, communications, and processes, enabling people with disabilities to access opportunities. Disability inclusion ensures that persons with disabilities can fully participate, belong, and thrive within those opportunities.

Accessibility enables persons with disabilities to enter the workplace or the premises of institutions, whilst inclusion creates an enabling environment where people with disabilities can participate, contribute, make decisions, have positive experiences and feel they belong. A business may have a ramp, but if people with disabilities are ignored and do not have a dignified customer experience, it may be accessible without being truly inclusive.

Accessibility vs Disability Inclusion

They're not the same.

ACCESSIBILITY
Removing barriers.

It helps people with disabilities **access** a place, service, product, or information.

- **Ramps** instead of stairs
- **Captions** on videos
- **Accessible websites** that everyone can use
- **Sign language** interpretation
- **Clear and readable** information

ACCESSIBILITY ASK:
"Can you access it?"

BUT
Access is the beginning.

DISABILITY INCLUSION
Goes further.

It ensures people with disabilities can **participate, contribute, make decisions** and **belong.**

- **Be heard**
  Your voice matters
- **Be involved**
  Included in processes and decisions
- **Lead**
  Given equal opportunities to grow and lead
- **Belong**
  Feel valued, respected and part of the team

INCLUSION ASK:
"Can you participate fully once you get there?"

Access is the beginning. Inclusion is the goal.

A place can be physically accessible yet still exclude people.
A truly inclusive system enables everyone to **participate, contribute and belong.**

Accessibility is the beginning of inclusion, not the destination. A truly inclusive system creates the conditions for everyone to **participate, contribute, and belong.**

> **"Access opens the door inclusion makes sure you belong."**

Let's move from access for all to **inclusion for all.**

#InclusionInsights #DisabilityInclusion #Accessibility #InclusionPractice.

A more inclusive tomorrow. **Together.**

SOURCE:
LinkedIn

Why disability inclusion matters at Vodacom

The company's ethos has always been to empower communities and make a difference in people's lives. At Vodacom, disability inclusion matters because our purpose is to connect everyone to a better future. We recognise that meaningful connectivity goes beyond access to technology; it means ensuring that every person, regardless of ability, can fully participate in the digital economy, the workplace, and society. We acknowledge that disability is part of the human experience. By intentionally removing barriers and creating inclusive products, services, and employment opportunities, Vodacom enables persons with disabilities to realise their potential as customers, employees, and community members. Disability inclusion also strengthens our business by driving innovation, enriching our talent pool, enhancing customer experiences, and ensuring that the diverse needs of the communities we serve are reflected in everything we do. As we work towards a more connected and inclusive society, we believe that disability inclusion is not simply the right thing to do; it is essential to delivering sustainable growth and creating shared value for all.

Part of humanity



Pioneers of promoting accessibility in Africa

Vodacom supports persons with disabilities' participation in communities, as it makes a difference in their lives. Vodacom included persons with disabilities as employees from the start of operations in South Africa in June 1994. A person with quadriplegia who used a wheelchair was the first manager in the call centre, and others with various disabilities were employed as call centre consultants. From the start of operations, the CEO and senior call centre executives ensured the infrastructure and buildings were designed with accessibility in mind to create a barrier-free workplace. After embedding employee inclusion, Vodacom focused on providing accessible products and services for consumers in 2004, when screen reader software became available. The company was the first to launch Speaking Phones for visually impaired persons in Africa. The reaction of the visually impaired community, their outburst of applause when they could, for the very first time, listen to an SMS being read aloud, is forever etched on my mind. This accessible phone enabled visually impaired people to use their devices independently for the first time, without having to ask a sighted person for help.

For Vodacom, disability inclusion is not an ad hoc project that only receives attention on specific disability days. Persons with disabilities are not seen as charity cases; instead, disability inclusion is embedded in the company's Purpose strategy of Empowering People. This is demonstrated by embedding accessibility into market ways of working, enabling positive employee and customer experiences when serving one of the world's largest underserved markets. Ultimately, this helps narrow the continent's digital divide.

Key statistics shaping urgency and opportunity

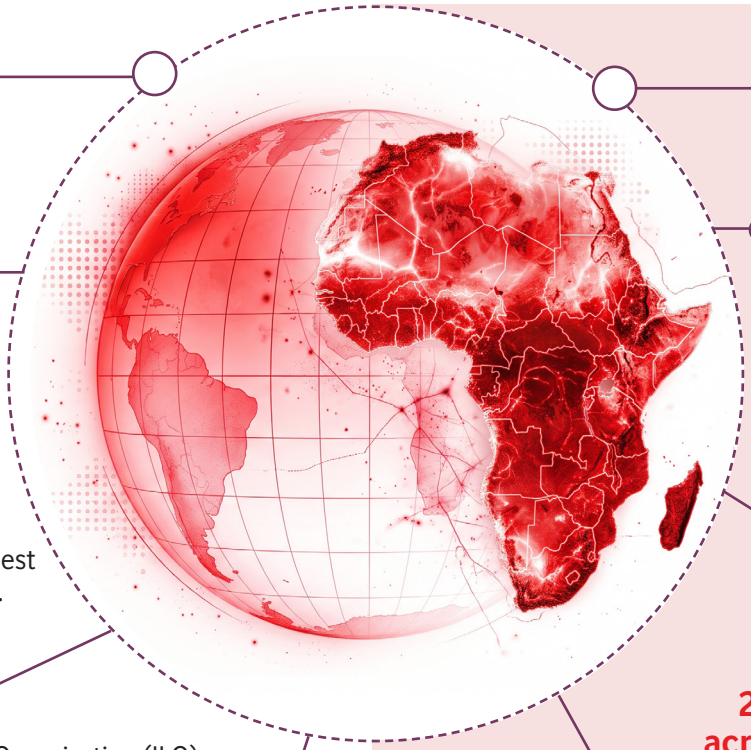
Prevalence of disability

GLOBAL

According to the WHO, more than **1.3 billion people** (1 in 6 people), representing **16% of the global population,** live with some form of disability, which is the largest minority group worldwide.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO), says persons with disabilities face persistent barriers in the labour market, with their participation rate **30% lower** than that of persons without disabilities.

Persons with disabilities are more likely to experience **adverse socioeconomic outcomes** such as less education, poorer health outcomes, lower levels of employment, and higher poverty rates.



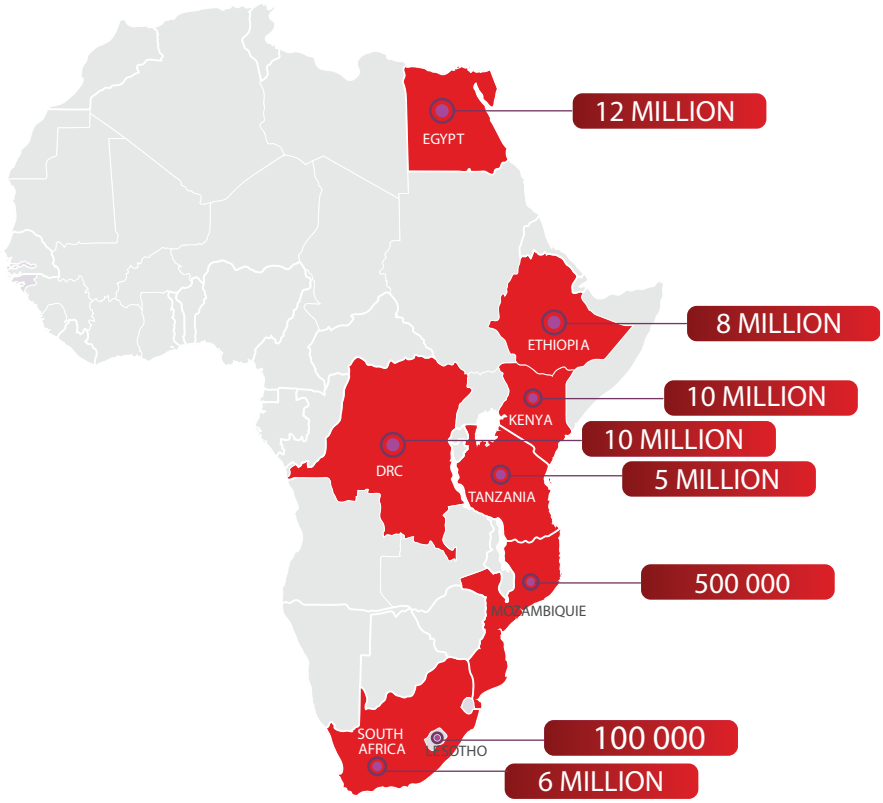
AFRICA

Disability prevalence is highest in developing countries, with up to **20% of persons** with disabilities living there.

Approximately **one in six people** live with a disability, representing more than **200 million people across the continent.**

Disability in Africa is caused by **ongoing** wars and conflicts, diseases, congenital conditions, crime and violence, road traffic injuries and ageing

Vodacom markets



Across the **eight markets** where Vodacom operates, approximately **52 million persons** with disabilities are part of the communities we serve. This large segment underscores the importance of recognising persons with disabilities as potential employees and customers, and requires designing products, services and experiences that are accessible and inclusive for everyone.

They are not a homogeneous group and include people who are blind, partially sighted, or have low vision; people who are deaf or hard of hearing; persons with physical or mobility disabilities; and people with communication disabilities. Their accessibility requirements differ significantly, highlighting the importance of providing multiple ways to access, understand, and interact with digital products and services.

Models and policy frameworks

Global and regional frameworks provide guidance on how to systemically respond to this dysfunction.

The oppression and exclusion that people with impairments face are caused by the way society is run and organised.



- **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**
- **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**
- **Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa**
- **GSMA Principles for Driving the Digital Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities**
- **CIPESA Disability and ICT Accessibility Framework Indicators**
- **African Disability Protocol**

SOURCE

https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/about-us/disability-in-london/social-model/the-social-model-of-disability-and-the-cultural-model-of-deafness/#
https://cipesa.org/2023/12/cipesa-webinar-launches-framework-to-assess-ict-accessibility-for-persons-with-disabilities-in-africa/
https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convention_accessible_pdf.pdf
https://sdgs.un.org/goals
https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-persons-disabilities-africa
https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-for-development/gsma_resources/principles-for-driving-the-digital-inclusion-of-persons-with-disabilities/

Stereotypes

Across Africa, persons with disabilities continue to face stereotypes, misconceptions and negative societal attitudes that underestimate their capabilities and potential. Disability is often viewed primarily through the lens of dependency, charity or limitation, rather than through the perspectives of human rights, talent, participation and economic contribution.

These perceptions can lead to exclusion from education, employment, digital services and broader economic and social participation. Addressing disability inclusion therefore requires more than removing physical and digital barriers. It requires organisations to challenge stereotypes, change attitudes and recognise persons with disabilities as employees, customers, innovators and leaders with equal rights and valuable contributions. Businesses have an important role to play in shifting this narrative by moving beyond perceptions of disability as a charitable or welfare issue and recognising disability inclusion as a human rights, talent, customer and business imperative.

Examples of stereotypes

Societal context | Disability stereotype

Assuming that a person with a disability cannot hold a senior, technical or leadership role.

In some communities, disability may also be stigmatised, associated with shame, superstition or misconceptions about its causes.



1. **Incapable and 'lesser than'**
2. **Dependent, helpless - disability is a sickness/curse**
3. **Homogeneous group**
4. **Unable to reach their final potential**
5. **More absent from work**
6. **Sad and miserable**
7. **Reasonable adjustments are expensive**

DISABILITY TERMINOLOGY

Use the correct disability terminology / Terms to use and avoid:

Person-First Language:

Places the person before the condition, person with a disability, e.g. a person with a visual impairment, person with a disability.

Use: Non-disabled, people without disabilities, specific needs

Avoid: Able-bodied, normal, differently-abled, persons living with a disability, physically challenged, special needs, PWD, suffers from, the disabled, handicapped, invalid, cripple

Use: Wheelchair user / person who uses a wheelchair

Avoid: Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair

Use: Person with an intellectual disability

Avoid: Mentally challenged, retarded, slow, subnormal

Use: Deaf / hard of hearing / person with hearing loss

Avoid: Deaf and dumb, deaf-mute

Use: Person with a mental health condition, psychosocial disability

Avoid: Crazy, insane, psycho, mentally ill, troubled

Use: Person with epilepsy / a seizure condition

Avoid: Epileptic, suffers from fits

Use: Person of short stature, little people

Avoid: Midget, dwarf

Use: A person with Albinism

Avoid: Albino

Respect personal preference:

Persons with lived experiences choose how they want to identify, e.g. as differently abled, disabled, person with a visual impairment.

SOURCES

Terms to avoid using: https://www.ungeneva.org/en/about/accessibility/principles#communication
For wheelchair user: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability
Wheelchair user, intellectual, deaf, see P17: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4042358/files/1401388-EN.pdf?ln=ar
Short stature, see P18: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4042358/files/1401388-EN.pdf?ln=ar
Albinism https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4042358/files/1401388-EN.pdf?ln=ar
See also https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4042358?ln=en&v=pdf

Vodacom's Disability Inclusion Framework

The company's Disability Inclusion Framework comprises interconnecting enablers that form part of Vodacom's strategy and are supported by policies, measurable indicators, resources and ongoing improvements. The enablers include the value proposition, human-centric leadership, inclusive employment, capacity building and accessible products and services.

There is an intentional focus on embedding accessibility and disability inclusion from the outset within ways of working. This ensures that employees with disabilities in the workplace experience inclusion and belonging, and that customers with disabilities have dignified customer experiences.

Vodacom's Disability Inclusion Framework consists of the following pillars:





Value proposition: The case for accessibility as a business imperative

Overview

Accessibility is fundamentally about equal participation, dignity, independence and opportunity. For Vodacom Group, promoting accessibility is therefore both a human-rights responsibility and a business imperative. Persons with disabilities represent an important yet historically underserved customer segment. When we intentionally include people with disabilities in the design of our products, services, technology, channels and business processes, we gain knowledge and insights that challenge assumptions, address misconceptions and uncover barriers that might otherwise remain invisible. Importantly, accessibility benefits more than persons with disabilities. When accessibility is embedded from the outset, it can create simpler, more intuitive and more inclusive experiences for everyone. This creates a compelling opportunity for Vodacom Group to move beyond accommodating disability to designing for inclusion, a source of customer growth, innovation, differentiation and social impact.

The Strategic Opportunity

Vodacom Group operates in markets where digital connectivity is increasingly a gateway to information, education, employment, healthcare, financial services and participation in society. Yet people with disabilities can still encounter barriers when accessing technology, digital platforms, customer service channels and other services.

At the same time, the disability community represents significant economic potential. Research cited in this business case estimates the global spending power of the disability community at $13 trillion. Only a small proportion of businesses globally are reported to be intentionally focused on making their offerings disability-inclusive. For Vodacom, this presents both a responsibility and an opportunity. If our products, technology and services are designed to be accessible, we can serve customers who might otherwise face barriers, strengthen our relationships with existing customers and contribute to narrowing the digital divide. The strategic shift is therefore: From accessibility as an accommodation for a minority to accessibility as a core principle in how Vodacom designs experiences for everyone.

Why Accessibility Is a Human Right

People with disabilities should be able to access information, communications, technology, products and services on an equal basis to others.
Accessibility enables people to exercise greater choice and control over their lives.

Removing barriers can:

- Promote equal access to products, services, technology and information.
- Enhance independence by allowing customers to transact and communicate without unnecessary reliance on others.
- Increase access to opportunities, including education, employment, entrepreneurship and participation in the digital economy.
- Improve quality of life through more equitable participation in society.
- Increase access to information, communication and digital services.

Accessibility should therefore not be viewed solely through the lens of compliance. It is an enabler of equality, dignity, inclusion and participation.

Why accessibility is a business imperative

There is a strong commercial case for promoting accessibility. Accenture research in 2023, which explored disability inclusion amid major technological advances and geopolitical shifts, found that companies that led on key disability inclusion criteria since 2018, saw 1.6 times more revenue, 2.6 times more net income and 2 times more economic profit than other companies. Further, leaders were more likely to outperform industry peers in productivity by 25 percent.

Vodacom is already seeing broad benefits, with even greater outcomes expected as it expands its drive to assist more people.

Increase the consumer base

Accessible products and services enable Vodacom to reach customers who might otherwise face barriers to using our digital and physical channels. Rather than treating people with disabilities as a niche market, accessibility recognises them as customers with purchasing power, expectations and choice.

Identify new revenue opportunities

Understanding the lived experiences of customers with disabilities can reveal unmet needs, underserved markets and opportunities for new products, services and propositions.
Inclusion can therefore shift from being perceived as a cost to becoming an engine of value creation and growth.

Improve customer experience and loyalty

Many accessibility improvements benefit a much broader customer population. Clear language, captions, intuitive navigation, accessible digital interfaces, flexible ways to communicate and simpler customer journeys can assist people with permanent disabilities as well as customers experiencing temporary, situational or age-related limitations.
Designing for accessibility can consequently lead to a better experience for everyone.

Strengthen reputation and brand

A demonstrable commitment to disability inclusion reinforces Vodacom's position as a responsible and purpose-led organisation. The greatest reputational benefit will come not merely from communicating that accessibility matters, but from ensuring customers consistently experience that commitment across Vodacom's products, services and channels.

Accelerate innovation

People who experience products differently can reveal barriers, opportunities and use cases that conventional design processes may overlook. Including people with disabilities in research, testing, development, and decision-making brings perspectives that can challenge assumptions and spark innovation. The principle should be to design with people with disabilities and not merely for them – applying **"Nothing About Us, Without Us"**.

Narrow the digital divide

As more essential activities move online, inaccessible technology risks entrenching exclusion.

For a connectivity and technology organisation, accessibility is closely linked to digital inclusion. Making our services accessible means extending the benefits of connectivity to more people and helping to ensure that no one is left behind in an increasingly digital society.

By including persons with disabilities as an often-overlooked segment, the company gains new knowledge and insights that demystify myths and misunderstandings. A major benefit of embedding accessibility intentionally and upfront into business processes is that everyone benefits, not only persons with disabilities.

Benefits for persons with disabilities

1	2	3	4	5
Promote equal access	**Enhance independence**	**Increase access to opportunities**	**Improve quality of life**	**Increase access to information**

Best practice:

- Vodacom established the Accessibility Office with an accessibility lead and expert to lead and drive the accessibility agenda, ensuring alignment with markets.
- The Accessibility Lead is a woman with a disability which supports the disability slogan "Nothing About Us, Without Us".
- Vodacom's Accessibility & Disability Inclusion is driven and led by persons with disabilities which demonstrates leadership's support of ensuring that they are leading the conversation on systemic inclusion.

Lessons learnt:

- Promoting accessibility and disability inclusion is the right thing to do.
- Creating an accessible environment and products is fundamental to becoming a truly inclusive company.
- Employees with disabilities are hardworking, loyal and great problem solvers.
- When designing for persons with disabilities, everyone benefits.
- Connecting purpose with commercial is more valuable than presenting them as separate agendas.



- Shifting from “fixing accessibility” to including it from the start prevents wasted budget and time on post-launch fixes.
- Adopt “nothing about us without us” by involving people with disabilities meaningfully in research, co-design, user testing and decision-making.
- When including accessibility as part of the customer experience strategy consultant’s awareness benefits all customers.
- Accessibility is a catalyst for innovation and not a restriction on innovation.
- When embedding accessibility into business units processes and roadmaps it ensures that the requirements of consumers with disabilities are taken into account.



Human-centric leadership



“If you truly driving inclusion, there is nothing more meaningful.”

Shameel Joosub: Vodacom Group CEO

Human-centred leadership is a leadership approach that prioritises people’s well-being, experiences, and growth while fostering a culture of inclusivity, empathy, and empowerment.

This leadership style aligns with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles by valuing diverse perspectives, ensuring equitable opportunities, and creating an inclusive workplace where all individuals feel valued and heard. Accessibility within Vodacom aligns directly with the business strategy and innovation rather than viewing it as a checkbox exercise and an afterthought.

Creating an environment where leaders openly discuss removing barriers result in processes which ensure positive and dignified experiences for employees and customers with disabilities. According to a study conducted by the The CEO Magazine, 78% of disability-inclusive leaders have a personal or family connection to disability, though lived experience is not required to drive effective transformation and inclusion in an organisation. Through the visionary leadership of Shameel Joosub, Vodacom Group has pivoted towards a deeply inclusive culture, positioning accessibility and disability inclusion at the centre of its corporate purpose and business strategy.

The Group CEO has been leading the disability agenda in a visible manner in that he speaks openly and confidently about disability and how this affects him even in his personal life. It is notable how two successful CEOs, Saya Nadella from Microsoft and Shameel Joosub from the Vodacom Group talks candidly about disability as it forms part of their personal sphere.

As the company’s Disability Champion, the Vodacom Group CEO has increased the visibility of disability inclusion at townhalls, events, webinars, reporting and at board level which is something very few CEOs demonstrate. His empathetic approach of leveraging tech for good ensures a workforce where everyone can feel they belong, including employees with disabilities. The Group CEO’s behaviour and leading by example encourages CEOs from our markets and other senior management to follow his example of embracing inclusion at every level of the organisation. One of his biggest contributions is the support towards ensuring that Vodacom’s products and services are accessible for consumers with disabilities. This will be discussed later in more detail when I discuss best practices of markets’ accessible products and services.

Human-centred leadership is a transformative leadership model that aligns with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion principles. By prioritising people over processes, organisations can cultivate an inclusive culture that drives engagement, innovation, and long-term success. Adopting this leadership style not only enhances workplace diversity but also creates a more equitable and inclusive environment for all.

Leadership Priority:

Phillip Besiimire, CEO Vodacom Tanzania, noted that
“Inclusion is a leadership thing; if I don’t lead on this, it becomes a sideshow.”
Vodacom on Inclusive Technology & Accessibility in Africa | Africa Tech Festival 2024

Similarly, Mohale Ralebitso, CEO of Vodacom Lesotho, emphasised the need for corporate leaders to actively engage with accessibility initiatives:
“Technology exists to solve societal challenges. If we aren’t designing for persons with disabilities from the outset, we are failing in our responsibility as business leaders.”
Persons with Disabilities Are Consumers Too: Why Accessibility Must Be a Business Priority | Africa Tech Festival

Best practice:

Together with the Vodacom Group CEO, most Vodacom markets CEOs have become visible champions for promoting disability inclusion in an intentional manner.

Lessons learnt:

- Systemic inclusion happens faster when disability inclusion is linked to strategic priorities, such as embedding disability empowerment in the organisation's purpose-led approach.
- Systemic inclusion must not be treated as an HR or standalone programme; it must be included into the company's strategic objectives, culture, performance measures, and leadership expectations.
- Human-centric leadership promotes an inclusive workplace and visible and consistent commitment.
- When a CEO fulfils the role of Disability Champion, it encourages other senior leaders to make intentional efforts to advance disability inclusion.
- Real inclusion occurs when senior leadership engages with employees with disabilities directly and entrusts employees with lived experiences to lead the disability inclusion agenda, embedding the slogan "Nothing About Us, Without Us."
- Human-centric leaders consider the impact on different groups and is supportive of ensuring that diverse voices are represented.
- Inclusion initiatives gain traction when executive sponsors are actively involved.
- Authentic leadership advocacy influences organisational culture.



Creating an inclusive workplace for employees with disabilities

Overview

An inclusive workplace is one where every employee feels valued, respected, and empowered to contribute their unique talents, regardless of disability, gender, age, race, culture, sexual orientation, or any other characteristics. It actively removes barriers, promotes equal opportunities, and fosters a culture of belonging where diversity is celebrated as a source of strength and innovation. By creating an environment that supports accessibility, equity, and participation, organisations enable all employees to reach their full potential, drive business success, and reflect the diverse communities they serve.

Best practice examples of workplace accessibility:

Disability Policy

Vodacom South Africa's Disability and Care Policies are comprehensive and detail every aspect of promoting an inclusive workplace. The Disability Inclusion Policy highlight self-disclosure of disabilities, employee resource groups, reasonable accommodation, accessible infrastructure, non-discriminatory recruitment practices, and employment programmes for students.

Accessible infrastructure

- Most company buildings are accessible, with a special mention of the Cape Town Techno Centre, the Regional Office, and the head office campus buildings in Johannesburg.
- Automated entrance doors from parking to lift and reception areas.
- Automated bathroom doors with access control to prevent misuse.
- Lower lift buttons.
- Lift voice announcer (announce the floor level).
- Lower access control scanners.
- Yellow high-contrast markings to stair edges to enhance safety and accessibility for people with visual impairments.

Reasonable accommodation

- Employees with disabilities are encouraged to request accommodations, as it enables Vodacom companies to make appropriate accommodations, which enhances equal access and promotes a barrier-free workplace.
- Vodacom South Africa introduced user-friendly digital disability processes: An easy self-disclosure process which is stress-free to complete, as you do not want to prolong this process unnecessarily, and an easy-to-complete reasonable accommodation process inclusive of relevant approvals. This is treated with high priority as it impacts employees' productivity and performance.
- The budget for accommodations is centralised and covered by HR/Facilities and IT departments.
- Inclusive design is applied when leasing, purchasing or designing buildings ensuring accessibility is part of the process upfront.

Training and skills development

- Disabled employees attend training courses, and courses on digital platforms are accessible to persons with visual impairments.
- When disabled employees attend in-person courses, the training vendor is notified in advance so that the course can be developed with their needs in mind.
- Vendors accommodate employees with disabilities by providing accessible venues and learning materials in accessible formats. For example, reading materials are sent in digital format to visually impaired employees, as their devices have accessibility features such as screen readers and large font.
- Vodacom South Africa provides a one-year dedicated management training programme, exclusively developed for employees with various disabilities and facilitated by experienced consultants with a deep understanding of disability.

Employee Resource Group (ERG)

- Vodacom South Africa introduced an ERG in 2018 that provides a safe, supportive forum for employees with disabilities, caregivers, and allies to connect, share experiences, and advocate for change. By bringing together

employees with lived experience, the group helps identify workplace barriers, co-create policies and practices, and promote greater accessibility and inclusion across the organisation. As a result, employees feel more valued, supported, and empowered to contribute their best work.

Lessons learnt:

- Education on inclusive employment ensures that staff (senior leaders, middle and junior levels) understand that making accommodations is not about favouring employees with disabilities; it is about promoting equal access to opportunities.
- Most accommodations are not costly to make, and those requiring a budget are often a once-off cost, and they benefit everyone, not only the person with a disability.
- When employees request accommodations, always consult them and do not judge them; listen and understand what they need so you can meet those needs appropriately.
- Ensure employees with disabilities have a career path mapped out so they know what roles they can move into next. Include in the career path the skills, qualifications, experiences, and competencies they need to develop.
- When HR staff and line managers understand the self-disclosure and accommodation processes, they are better equipped to support employees who self-disclose and request accommodations, as many employees find it stressful to disclose their disability, especially persons with invisible disabilities.
- Empathetic and knowledgeable HR staff and line managers contribute towards creating a safe psychological environment and ensure stress-free and positive experiences for employees with disabilities when they self-disclose or request accommodations.
- When an employee with a disability leads the ERG, it provides authentic leadership, valuable lived experience, and builds trust and engagement that help shape meaningful inclusion initiatives.
- Including accessibility upfront in ways of working eliminates unnecessary costs and time.
- Reasonable accommodation benefits both employees and the organisation.
- When teams have no disabled employees, that team lacks diversity which is a missed opportunity to get creative ideas.



Capacity building

Internal

Promoting accessibility and disability inclusion is not only the responsibility of the Inclusion Expert or HR; it is everyone's responsibility. Various internal platforms, such as webinars, courses, and conferences, are used to engage employees and increase their knowledge of accessibility and disability inclusion, and to help them understand the benefits for the organisation.

Accessibility awareness raising is one of the main vehicles to raise awareness and therefore ongoing sessions are held with employees of various business units and roles. This develops and strengthens employees' skills, knowledge, resources, systems, and abilities, encouraging them to design equitable processes that include the needs of people with disabilities from the start. Raising awareness not only educates employees about disability inclusion, but it also equips them with knowledge and skills to be intentional when designing technology, processes, products and services. The ultimate benefit is that once teams understand how accessibility benefits the business and people with disabilities, they become disability confident and pivot to becoming allies who advocate for accessibility within the organisation.

To engage employees and encourage staff to become allies, we implement various internal stakeholder engagement programmes to encourage attendance at educational disability sessions. Training is a focus area for the company and to align with this, an online in-house accessibility course was developed and is available for all staff to attend. The course reflects our internal inclusive culture, aligns with the organisation's roadmap and ways of working, and uses real examples and actions that staff can easily identify with.

To further strengthen staff's disability knowledge and relationships with external stakeholders, Vodacom began hosting annual accessibility and disability conferences in 2024. The conferences demonstrate Vodacom's commitment to ensuring that people with disabilities can fully participate in the digital economy. They highlight the societal barriers persons with disabilities face in Africa and bring together disability advocates, businesses, governments, academics, and technology experts to share knowledge and best practices. This helps organisations across Africa improve their understanding of promoting accessible workplaces and accessible products and services.

Training frontline staff is essential to ensure persons with disabilities receive dignified customer experiences. Frontline staff are often the human face of an organisation. Training them to confidently and respectfully serve consumers with disabilities is therefore essential, because even an accessible building, website, app or product can become inaccessible when the person delivering the service does not understand disability inclusion.

Training should move beyond basic disability awareness and enable employees to demonstrate practical inclusive behaviours:

Employees should understand:	Employees should be able to:
• Disability etiquette	• Communicate respectfully
• Visible and non-visible disabilities	• Avoid assumptions
• Different communication requirements	• Adapt their communication
• Assistive technologies	• Support rather than interfere
• Accessibility features/services available	• Explain accessible options
• The importance of independence	• Ask before assisting
• Escalation procedures	• Resolve accessibility barriers
• Dignity and privacy	• Handle sensitive interactions appropriately

External stakeholder relationships

Capacity building can strengthen external stakeholder relationships by moving an organisation from simply engaging stakeholders to creating value with them. Capacity building also occurs when Vodacom markets engage Organisations for Persons with Disabilities and regional policymakers and experts to provide guidance on accessibility matters. It builds the knowledge, skills and confidence of partners while encouraging collaboration and mutual learning. Vodacom provides accessibility training and knowledge-sharing opportunities for suppliers, NGOs, government partners, developers and organisations of persons with disabilities; it can build their accessibility capability while simultaneously strengthening Vodacom's relationships with these stakeholders.

Best practice examples:

- Vodacom Group established the Vodacom Accessibility Forum, which hosts relevant and interesting quarterly one-hour webinars with staff.
- Internal disability experts from various business units and senior leaders from markets are invited to co-host webinars and to participate in panel sessions to present on accessibility solutions implemented within their business units.
- External stakeholders, and especially persons with lived experiences, participate in webinars and share information on new technological innovations and how they benefit persons with disabilities.
- In addition to Vodacom Group hosting annual group disability conferences, markets such as Lesotho, Ethiopia, and Egypt have replicated this success by hosting their own local conferences, strengthening relationships with Organisations for Persons with Disabilities, government, and other key stakeholders.
- Most Vodacom markets have dedicated training programmes which trains store consultants to treat consumers with disabilities with dignity.
- Markets ensure that accessibility is built into new store consultants' onboarding training.
- Safaricom Ethiopia accelerated stakeholder engagement and partnerships with disability organisations by hosting an accessibility and disability conference, which built trust and collaboration.

Lessons learnt:

- Consultants do not have to be concerned about knowing everything about every disability. The golden rule is to listen to the customer, speak to them directly and ask, 'How can I assist or help?'. Do not make assumptions, ask before helping, respect their choices and focus on finding a solution. The customer will tell you what they want and if you do not have an answer or are unsure, request your supervisor or manager for support. A positive, friendly and engaging attitude means the world to a consumer with a disability and will translate in a positive experience even if you do not have all the answers at once.
- It is about how we make consumers feel when they interact with us.
- Some of Vodacom's customers reflected that when they receive dignified customer service at stores, they keep returning to the same store for all their technology needs.
- Investing in the capacity of external stakeholders strengthens the wider disability inclusion ecosystem. When organisations share knowledge and expertise while also learning from their stakeholders, relationships evolve from transactional engagements into trusted, strategic partnerships.
- Training, workshops, knowledge-sharing sessions and joint initiatives strengthen collaboration which create opportunities for organisations and stakeholders to learn from one another and develop solutions together.
- Awareness raising of promoting accessibility must be done on an ongoing basis, not only once or twice a year when launching a disability campaign.
- When senior leaders actively participate in disability awareness initiatives, it signals that accessibility is a business priority rather than just a compliance requirement.
- When internal accessibility experts participate in awareness sessions, they share real tangible examples of barriers that have been identified and resolved which demonstrates achievable solutions rather than theoretical concepts.
- Sessions that include accessibility leaders, advocates and allies provide an opportunity to elevate lived experiences and helps colleagues understand real-world barriers and opportunities.
- Building expertise in-house creates sustainable capability, reduces dependency on external resources, strengthens organisational resilience, lowers long-term costs, and enables employees to drive innovation and continuous improvement from within the organisation.
- When designing online training courses, digital platforms must be accessible for persons for various disabilities, for example for visually impaired employees using screen readers.
- Disability confidence training reduces misconceptions and unconscious bias.
- Building internal champions accelerates organisational change.

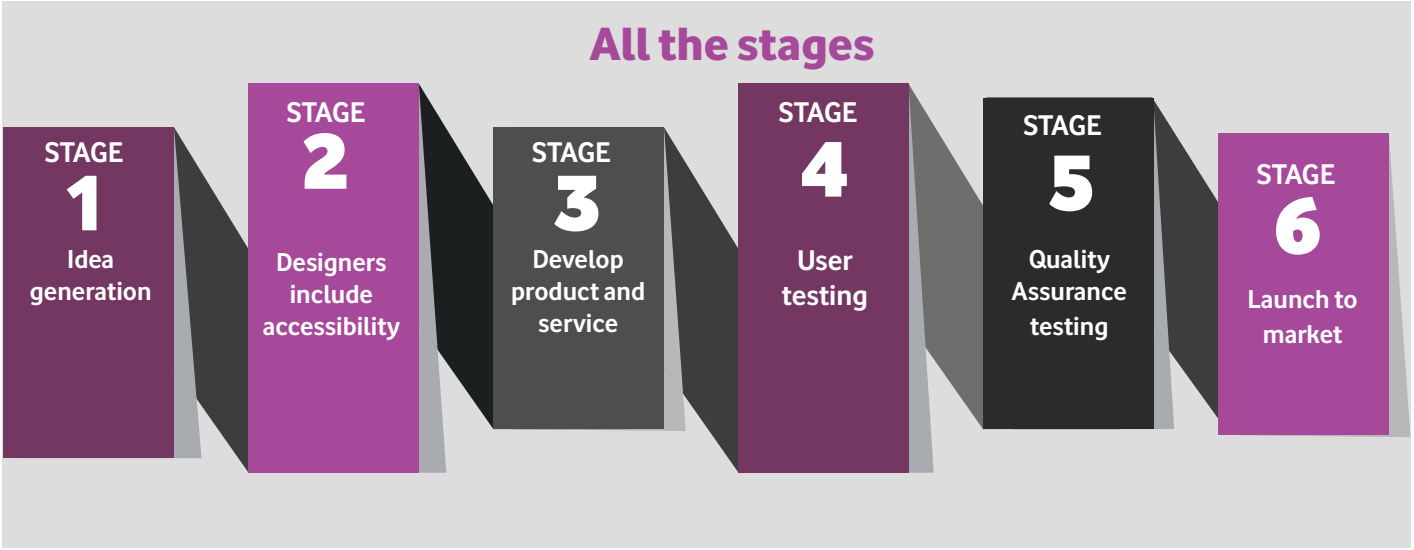
Inclusive and accessible products and services

Overview

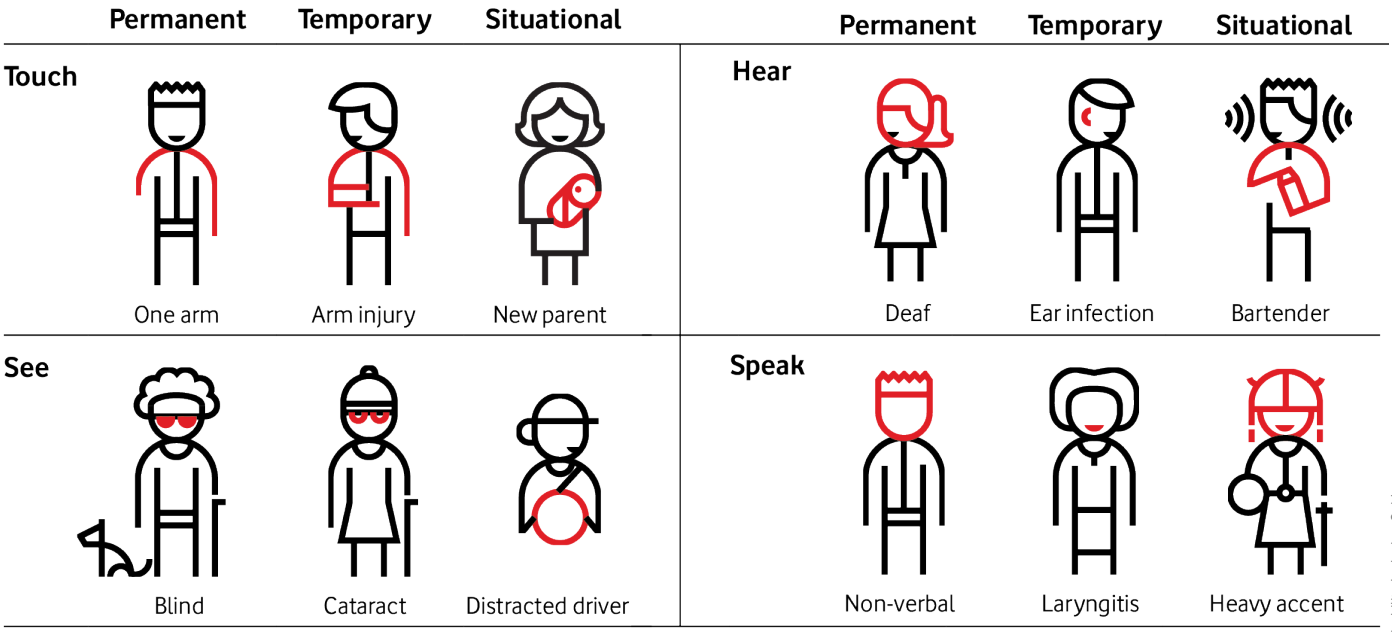
Accessible products and services ensure that the needs of consumers with disabilities are addressed from the outset. For telecommunications and tech companies, accessibility is fundamental to digital participation. When products and services are inaccessible, individuals are excluded from communication, education, employment, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Vodacom's approach focuses on embedding accessibility into product design, development, testing, procurement, and customer support.

Accessible products and services reach a wider customer base, enhance the user experience for everyone, drive innovation, and strengthen brand trust. Features originally developed for accessibility often become mainstream solutions that benefit all users, demonstrating that inclusive design delivers value far beyond its initial purpose. By ensuring our digital ecosystem is accessible, Vodacom can better serve diverse customers, employees, partners, and communities across the continent.

Accessible product development stages



Who benefits from accessibility?



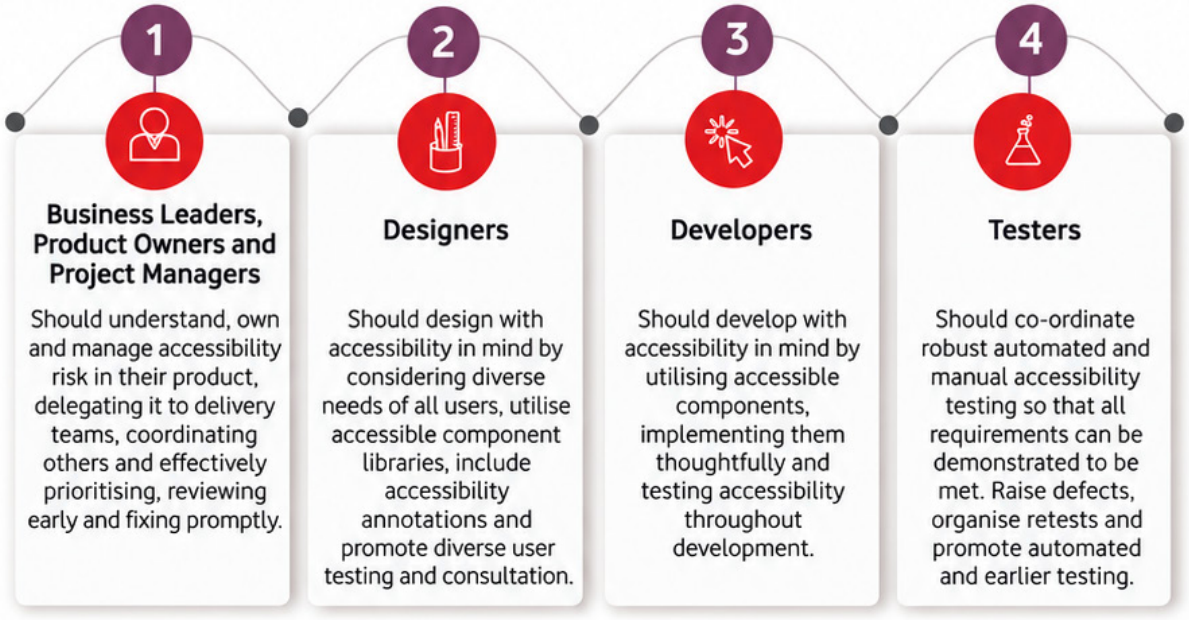
SOURCE: Microsoft Inclusive Design, Inclusive 101 Guidebook, Microsoft Design

Vodacom's Accessibility and Disability Inclusion Guide

How to deliver accessible digital services

It's everyone's responsibility.

The misconception that accessibility is something only developers and testers need to worry about is incorrect and leads to wasted time, effort and resources. Everyone needs to be committed to ensuring that accessibility is prioritised, documented and executed at every stage of the life cycle. It's a team sport.







Types of Vodacom accessible products and services

Introduction

Creating an inclusive digital society requires more than providing connectivity. It also requires ensuring that people with disabilities can access, understand and use products and services at every customer touchpoint. Vodacom's approach embeds accessibility throughout the customer journey, including accessible retail stores and call centres, inclusive devices, accessible websites and apps, disability-confident frontline staff, and initiatives that strengthen the digital skills of people with disabilities. Collectively, these interventions help remove physical, digital, communication and attitudinal barriers and enable customers with disabilities to engage with greater independence, choice and dignity.



Stores/Shops

An organisation can have strong disability-inclusion policies, but customers ultimately experience inclusion through its products, people and environments. An accessible Vodacom store ensures that customers with disabilities can access our products, services, information and support with dignity, independence and choice. Accessibility removes barriers to doing business, improves the customer experience, supports our human-rights commitments and enables us to serve a broader customer base. Every inaccessible touchpoint represents a potential barrier between Vodacom and a customer. Therefore, accessibility should be embedded in the design and operation of every store from the outset, rather than addressed retrospectively as an accommodation. Accessible stores are not about creating a different experience for customers with disabilities. They ensure customers with disabilities have equitable access to the same quality of customer experience as everyone else.

Best practices:

- Most Vodacom stores meet the basic requirements for accessibility by ensuring that store infrastructure is accessible, providing lower desks for persons using wheelchairs and training staff.
- Vodacom Mozambique has wayfinding which indicates the path to the store which is helpful for persons with low vision and persons who are partially sighted.

Lessons learnt:

- When customers have excellent in-store experiences, they keep returning because they know they will receive dignified customer service.
- The store is where the accessibility commitment becomes tangible for customers.
- When customers feel welcome, respected, and able to participate independently, accessibility becomes part of the organisation's customer promise rather than simply a compliance requirement.
- Inclusive store design can also make the environment easier to use for older customers, people with temporary injuries, customers pushing prams, and people experiencing situational limitations.
- Accessibility is much broader than providing a wheelchair ramp. It can include physical access, appropriate counter heights, clear signage, accessible queuing, communication support, accessible information, and consideration for customers with visual, hearing, mobility, cognitive and other disabilities.
- An inaccessible entrance, service counter, information format or communication process can prevent a potential customer from completing a purchase or accessing support. Removing accessibility barriers therefore removes barriers to customer acquisition, service and retention.
- When a customer can enter a store, browse products, communicate with employees, make decisions and complete a transaction without having to depend on another person because of an accessibility barrier, this supports dignity and independence

Contact Centres

Accessible call centres are important because they are often the human gateway to an organisation. If that gateway relies only on conventional voice communication, customers with disabilities can be excluded from resolving problems, purchasing services, reporting fraud, accessing emergency support, or simply exercising the same level of independence as other customers. Customers with disabilities should not routinely have to rely on family members, friends or other third parties to communicate with an organisation. An accessible contact centre enables customers to interact directly, privately and independently with the organisation. An inaccessible call centre turns a customer's disability into a barrier. An accessible call centre removes that barrier and enables the customer to engage independently, privately and with dignity. Accessibility should not be viewed simply as an additional disability service. It is fundamentally about customer experience, equality, independence, dignity, safety and good service design.

An accessible contact centre should provide various communication options that enable persons with disabilities to choose their preferred communication style:

Accessible channels:
voice, email, SMS/text, accessible webchat and relay services.

Sign-language access:
for example, video relay for customers who use sign language.

Accessible authentication:
alternatives when standard verification processes create barriers for persons with disabilities.

Accessible IVR
sufficient response time, clear language, multiple languages, and an easy route to a human agent.

Accessible digital platforms:
websites, apps and chat systems that work effectively with assistive technologies.

Reasonable flexibility:
recognising that different customers may communicate in different ways.

Inclusive quality measures:
measuring the experience and outcomes of customers with disabilities, rather than focusing solely on average handling time.

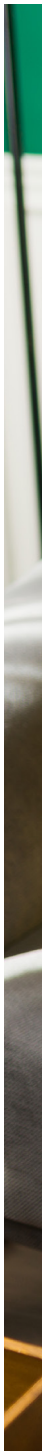
Disability-confident agents:
staff trained in respectful communication and in disability etiquette.

Best practice:

- Vodacom SA established the Specific Needs & Relay Contact Centre for Deaf persons and has employed Sign Language interpreters as consultants to assist sign language users.
- Link to video: Specific Needs - Persons with communication barriers | Vodacom.
- Vodacom Tanzania established the Deaf Contact Centre, and its agents speak sign language and can assist sign language users. Flagship stores also have consultants who can communicate with sign language users.
- Vodafone Egypt established the Deaf & Hard-of-hearing call centre for Deaf persons. Link: Vodafone Sign Language Service - YouTube.
- Safaricom Kenya. Link: Hildah Njeru | Customer Care Representative at Safaricom.
- Safaricom Kenya assists sign language users in-store through trained staff who communicate via Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) to facilitate services such as SIM replacements and M-Pesa activations.
- Safaricom Kenya partnered with Signs Media Kenya to embed the assistALL tool directly within the M-Pesa super app, which provides on-demand sign language interpretation services.
  Link: [Kenya] Safaricom partners with Signs Media to host the assistALL mini app on M-PESA App - Africa Business Communities.

Lessons learnt:

- A voice-only contact centre can unintentionally exclude customers. Traditional call centres are often designed around spoken communication, which can create barriers for customers who are Deaf or hard of hearing, have speech disabilities or communicate differently. Providing multiple accessible communication channels is therefore fundamental to an inclusive customer experience.
- Choice of communication channel is essential. No single communication method will meet the needs of every person with a disability. Customers should be able to choose the channel that works best for them, whether voice, email, SMS/text, accessible webchat, relay services or sign-language video support.



Lessons learnt:

- Accessibility must span the entire customer journey. An accessible contact channel alone is insufficient if customers encounter inaccessible IVR systems, authentication processes, websites, apps or chat platforms elsewhere in the journey. Accessibility needs to be considered end-to-end, from initial contact and identity verification through to successful resolution of the customer's enquiry.
- Technology alone does not create an inclusive customer experience; it must be paired with training frontline staff to treat customers with dignity. Frontline agents must be equipped with disability awareness and accessible communication skills, and apply active listening to adapt to different customer needs.
- Customers with disabilities may communicate differently, require additional time or need information presented through a different channel. Contact-centre procedures should include reasonable flexibility rather than relying on rigid, standardised processes that may inadvertently disadvantage customers.
- Barriers become particularly significant when customers need to report fraud, resolve account issues or obtain urgent support. Accessibility should therefore be treated as an essential customer-service capability rather than an optional add-on.
- A truly inclusive contact centre requires more than a single accessibility intervention. The lesson is that channels, technology, processes, people and performance measures must work together.



Websites/apps

Digital accessibility has become essential because digital services are now a primary way people communicate, work, learn, shop, bank and access essential services. If those services are inaccessible, persons with disabilities can be prevented from participating independently and equally.

An accessible website or app is not simply one that a person with a disability can access. It is one that enables them to independently complete the same essential customer journeys as other customers, effectively, privately and with dignity. Accessibility is therefore best embedded from the beginning and maintained throughout the digital product lifecycle. It should be considered from the start of product design and throughout development, testing, procurement and ongoing maintenance, rather than added after a product has already been built.

Digital accessibility is not about creating a separate digital experience for persons with disabilities. It is about designing a single inclusive experience that as many people as possible can use independently, effectively and with dignity. If customers can see your website or download your app but cannot independently register, authenticate, transact, obtain support or resolve a problem because of their disability, they do not have equal access to your organisation.

Best practice:

- Vodafone Egypt introduced a digital accessibility widget to make its digital consumer platforms inclusive for persons with disabilities.
- Vodacom South Africa designed the VodaPay App with accessibility in mind and used feedback from staff with disabilities to improve the app's accessibility.

Lessons learnt:

- Digital accessibility is essential for equal participation as websites and apps increasingly provide access to communication, banking, shopping, education, employment and essential services; inaccessible digital platforms can exclude persons with disabilities from everyday activities. Accessibility should therefore be regarded as a fundamental requirement of digital service delivery, not an optional feature.
- The goal is one inclusive digital experience, not a separate experience. Digital accessibility does not mean creating separate websites, apps or processes for persons with disabilities. The aim should be to design one inclusive experience that enables as many people as possible to use the same products and services independently, effectively and with dignity.
- Accessibility must cover the entire digital customer journey. A website or app cannot be considered truly accessible
- Digital accessibility is essential for equal participation as websites and apps increasingly provide access to communication, banking, shopping, education, employment and essential services; inaccessible digital platforms can exclude persons with disabilities from everyday activities. Accessibility should therefore be regarded as a fundamental requirement of digital service delivery, not an optional feature.
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- Accessibility must cover the entire digital customer journey. A website or app cannot be considered truly accessible
- simply because a customer can open or navigate it. Customers with disabilities must be able to independently complete the full journey, including registration, authentication, transactions, payments, accessing information, obtaining support and resolving problems.
- Retrofitting accessibility after a website or app has been developed makes it harder to implement consistently. Accessibility should be considered from the outset and embedded into product design, development, procurement, testing, deployment and ongoing maintenance.
- Designing for compatibility with assistive technologies is essential as customers interact with digital platforms in different ways, including through screen readers, screen magnification, keyboard navigation, voice technologies and other assistive tools. Digital products need to be designed and coded so that assistive technologies can correctly interpret and interact with content, controls and functionality.
- The product, not the person's disability, can create the barrier. A blind customer may be unable to make a payment if a visually labelled "Pay" button has not been given an accessible name and their screen reader announces only "button." The customer's blindness is not what prevents the transaction. The inaccessible design creates the barrier.

Lessons learnt:

This is an important mindset shift: Rather than asking how a person's disability prevents them from using a digital service, organisations should ask what barriers within the digital service prevent the person from using it.

- When digital services are inaccessible, customers with disabilities may have to ask another person to perform tasks on their behalf. This can reduce independence and may compromise privacy, particularly when dealing with personal or financial information. Accessible digital services enable customers to manage their own interactions and transactions with greater independence, choice and dignity.
- Testing with persons with disabilities can identify practical usability barriers that technical testing may not reveal and should complement automated and expert accessibility testing.
- When an inaccessible website or app prevents a customer from completing a transaction, the organisation has not only created an accessibility barrier. It may also have lost a transaction, a customer or an opportunity to build customer loyalty. Accessible digital services broaden the number of people who can independently engage with an organisation's products and services.



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Inclusive smartphones

Smartphones have become essential tools for everyday life, so their accessibility can directly affect whether a person with a disability can communicate, work, learn, travel, manage money and participate independently in society. For accessibility to be truly effective, many of these capabilities need to be built into the device rather than treated as optional extras. Their accessibility can therefore directly influence whether people with disabilities are able to participate independently in an increasingly digital society.

For many persons with disabilities, accessibility features are not optional extras. They transform a smartphone from a potentially inaccessible device into a powerful assistive technology and tool for independence. Accessible smartphones run operating systems with comprehensive built-in accessibility features, such as Apple iOS and Google Android. These operating systems provide assistive technologies that enable people with visual, hearing, physical, speech and cognitive disabilities to use smartphones more independently.

Built-in features such as screen readers, magnification, adjustable text and display settings, captions, and alternative methods of interaction can enable people with different disabilities to use the same mainstream devices as other consumers. A person with a disability should not have to rely on another person simply to use their phone. TalkBack is Android's built-in screen reader, while VoiceOver is built into the iPhone.

Built-in Apple and Android accessibility allow:

ANDROID APP ON Google play

Download on the App Store

- A blind person to independently read and send messages, navigate apps and make calls using a screen reader.
- A deaf or hard-of-hearing person to access audio via captions.

Best practice:

- Vodacom stores have a display of live phones that users can view and handle before purchasing a device.
- Store consultants assist persons with disabilities in setting up their new phones and ensure that the phone is working when the customer leaves the store.
- Shout out to Apple and Google for building accessibility into the phone's operating systems from the start. Before smartphones became available in South Africa, Vodacom purchased speaking phone software licences, and the warehouse loaded them individually onto specific phones for visually impaired people – it was called Speaking Phones.

Lessons learnt:

- Built-in accessibility features enable people with disabilities to perform everyday activities independently and support privacy and dignity. This reduces unnecessary reliance on family members, colleagues or other sighted or hearing people, thereby strengthening personal autonomy.
- Accessibility should be integrated into mainstream smartphone design rather than added retrospectively.
- With appropriate accessibility features, the same smartphone used by the general public can become a powerful assistive tool.
- Smartphones increasingly provide access to banking, employment, education, healthcare, shopping, transport, government services and social networks.
- The smartphone itself can be an assistive technology. When accessibility is built in, the same device that everyone else uses can also become a powerful assistive technology. For example:

Disability or need	Accessible smartphone feature	What it enables
Blindness	Screen reader	Phone can be operated without seeing the screen
Low vision	Magnification, larger text, contrast	Information can be made easier to see

Digital skills

Promoting digital skills among persons with disabilities is essential because access to technology alone does not guarantee digital inclusion. People also need the knowledge, confidence and skills to use accessible technologies effectively, enabling them to participate independently in education, employment, financial services and society. Developing digital skills among persons with disabilities can help organisations build a more diverse talent pipeline and bring people with lived experience of disability into the design of technology.
This should enable persons with disabilities to have the skills and opportunities to help design the technology.

The current 2030 United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy places digital accessibility among its accountability priorities and seeks accessible digital systems and communications as part of broader disability inclusion. Providing a person with a device and connectivity gives them digital access. Providing accessible technology and digital skills gives them the opportunity for digital independence. For technology organisations in particular, this distinction is extremely important. Connectivity is only the first step. The objective should not simply be to connect persons with disabilities, but to equip them with accessible technology, digital skills and the confidence to enable independence, employment, lifelong learning and full participation in the digital economy and society.

Best practice:

- Vodacom DRC implemented the award-winning economic empowerment programme in 2022 for women with disabilities, Je Suis Cap, which means I am Capable. Its main purpose is to help women with disabilities become financially independent and participate more fully in their communities and the economy. Je Suis Cap demonstrates how Vodacom DRC combines digital and financial inclusion with entrepreneurship to advance the economic empowerment of women with disabilities. Through financial literacy, access to M-Pesa, technology and start-up support, the programme enables women with disabilities to establish income-generating businesses, strengthen their financial independence and participate more fully in their communities.
- Vodacom South Africa has launched two smart digital centres at organisations for persons with visual impairments to equip visually impaired people with digital skills. In partnership with the Cape Town Society for the Blind, Vodacom support the SmartDigi Training Programme to enhance the digital literacy of blind and visually impaired people. The programme equips participants with practical skills to use smartphones, built-in accessibility features and digital applications independently. By combining access to accessible technology with digital skills development, the initiative helps persons with visual disabilities participate more independently in an increasingly digital society. Vodacom also partnered with the South African National Council for the Blind to provide access to assistive technologies and support people in developing the skills required to use these solutions effectively, helping to strengthen independence, digital participation, education and employment opportunities.
- Vodacom Lesotho established the Insight Centre at the State Library in Maseru to improve access to information and digital resources for blind and visually impaired people. The digital library provides solutions including Braille translation and printing technology, accessible reading devices and digital talking-book technology. Using these assistive technologies strengthens the digital skills of visually impaired persons, which helps reduce barriers to information, education and digital participation for persons with disabilities.

Lessons learnt:

- Digital skills increase confidence and digital safety as it is more than learning which buttons to press.
- Connectivity alone does not guarantee digital inclusion. Providing affordable connectivity or a device is only the starting point. Persons with disabilities also require accessible devices, accessible digital services and the skills and confidence to use them effectively. Digital inclusion initiatives should therefore address the entire user journey rather than focusing on connectivity in isolation.
- Accessibility features only create value when people know how to use them.
- Embedding accessibility features into smartphones, computers, and applications is essential, but their potential can remain unrealised if users are unaware of them or don't know how to activate and use them. Accessibility awareness and practical training should therefore form an integral part of digital-skills development.
- Accessible technology + accessible services + digital skills = meaningful digital participation.
- Digital competence is an enabler of independence as it enables persons with disabilities to perform everyday activities independently, from communicating and managing finances to accessing information, healthcare, government services and transport. Digital skills development should therefore be viewed as an enabler of autonomy, choice and self-reliance, rather than simply technology training.

Lessons learnt:

- Digital skills are increasingly employment skills because recruitment, learning, collaboration, and everyday work are becoming increasingly digital.
- Digital skills can help overcome barriers beyond the digital environment
- For people who face physical, transport or communication barriers, digital platforms can provide alternative routes to education, services, employment and social participation. When digital services are accessible and users have the skills to navigate them, technology can help remove barriers in the physical environment.
- Digital skills development creates opportunities for persons with disabilities to become employees, entrepreneurs, developers, innovators and creators who actively shape the digital society.
- However, meaningful inclusion requires more than providing technology. Persons with disabilities also need appropriate training, ongoing support and the skills to use technology confidently and independently.



Conclusion: Advancing Accessibility and Disability Inclusion

Vodacom's accessibility and disability inclusion journey demonstrates that meaningful and sustainable inclusion is achieved through leadership commitment, intentional action, collaboration and continuous learning. While progress may look different across markets, every step taken to remove barriers and create more accessible and inclusive experiences contributes to a future in which persons with disabilities can participate fully and equally in the digital world, the workplace and society.

This Guide captures the practices, experiences and lessons learnt throughout Vodacom's journey. It is not intended to provide a single blueprint or to suggest that there is a final destination for disability inclusion. Instead, it provides a practical foundation from which organisations can learn, adapt successful approaches to their local contexts, build internal capability and accelerate their accessibility and disability inclusion journeys.

A key lesson from our experience is that accessibility and disability inclusion cannot be the responsibility of a single individual, team or function. Sustainable change requires collective ownership across the organisation, supported by senior leadership and strengthened through partnerships with employees with disabilities, organisations of persons with disabilities, customers, governments, industry partners and communities. Importantly, the principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us" should remain central to this work, ensuring that persons with disabilities are actively involved in shaping the decisions, products, services and experiences that affect them.

As a technology and connectivity company, Vodacom has an important opportunity to use technology to enable inclusion and independence. By embedding accessibility across our workplaces, customer experiences, digital platforms, products, services and ways of working, we can help reduce barriers and enable more persons with disabilities to participate in an increasingly digital society.

Our journey has also taught us the importance of building capability, sharing knowledge and learning from one another. Solutions developed in one market can inspire progress in another, while partnerships and engagement with external stakeholders can strengthen the wider disability-inclusion ecosystem. By sharing both our successes and our lessons learnt, we can accelerate progress not only within Vodacom but also across the communities and markets we serve.

The journey, however, is far from complete. Technologies will evolve, customer expectations will shift, and our understanding of accessibility will continue to deepen. We must therefore remain willing to listen, learn, innovate, measure progress, and challenge ourselves to do better.

Ultimately, accessibility is about more than compliance. It is about dignity, equality, independence, choice and belonging. By embedding accessibility and disability inclusion across how we lead, design, innovate, employ and serve, we can help create a more inclusive digital future in which no one is left behind.

Our ambition should not be merely to make disability inclusion something Vodacom does, but to make accessibility and inclusion integral to who we are and how we do business. Vodacom's disability inclusion journey continues. While significant progress has been made, disability inclusion is not a destination. It requires ongoing commitment, learning, innovation, and collaboration. The greatest lesson from our experience is that accessibility and disability inclusion are not about special treatment. They are about removing barriers so that everyone can participate equally.

When organisations embrace disability inclusion, they unlock talent, reach new markets, drive innovation, and create more equitable societies. By embedding the principles of value creation, human-centric leadership, disability employment, capacity building, and accessible products and services, organisations can move from intention to impact and help build a more connected and inclusive future for all.

CALL TO ACTION
FOR DESIGNERS



The tools that you design really change the equation in terms of what I can contribute. Remove those obstacles and let me contibute my talents, because I want to be a part of society, I want to give everything I have, and I don't want to sit on the sidelines. You can change that. You can change the rules of the game so the game includes me and includes my talents

DR VICTOR PINEDA (PhD)



It's my desire that we will soon stop talking about persons with disabilities as a 'special case' or 'after thought' because we will be designing inclusivity into everything we do.

DR KAREN SMIT (PhD)

Ultimately,
it's about systemic inclusion and intersectionality.


DISABILITY IS PART OF
HUMANITY.
IT IS NORMAL TO
BE DIFFERENT.

Operational Standards

Minimum Standards	Description
ACCESSIBLE VODACOM BUILDINGS & INCLUSIVE EMERGENCY PROCEDURES	
Accessible infrastructure	Ensure accessibility of buildings and premises is included in lease requirements (accessible entrances, disabled parking and bathrooms, lifts).
	Accessible entrances to buildings – ramps, automated doors.
	Automated doors of Bathroom/washrooms, business areas, entrances.
	Provide parking bays close to the building entrance.
	Paint stairs yellow on edges to increase visibility for partially sighted persons.
	Provide accessible Bathrooms for employees with disabilities (access controlled to prevent misuse).
	Quiet room for neurodivergent employees (Vodacom Century City Cape Town).
	Low lift buttons and Voice recognition in lifts.
	Emergency procedures: • Create a Personal Emergency Plan for employees with disabilities. • Provide evacuation chairs. • Develop an Emergency Services Policy and Procedure. • Install flashing lights for deaf and hearing-impaired persons together with a siren. • Provide Emergency exits for when lifts are not working/fire stairwells.
STORES / SHOPS	
Include accessibility requirements in Leasing Agreements	• Ensure shops/stores leased comply with the minimum accessibility standards (level entrance/ramp, wide doorways, consultants table/s to be low for wheelchair users to use comfortably, inside of store level). • Accessibility promotes dignified customer and employee experiences.
Identifying disabled-user friendly stores	Place an approved brand disability logo on the door at the entrance which indicates that the store is disabled-friendly. 
Parking bays	Disabled parking bays close to the entrance of shops.
Location of shops	Shopping centres/malls should provide: • Elevators or lifts. • Ramps between level changes. • Accessible restrooms. • Clear directional signage. • Accessible bathrooms.
	Clear, signage for wayfinding to the shop.
Internal shop layout	• Ramp or level entrance to enter the store and wheelchair accessible within the store.

STORES / SHOPS

Internal shop layout

- Accessible doors and wide entrances for wheelchairs and strollers.
- Lower counters for wheelchair users, short-stature people and the elderly.
- Where stores operate across multiple levels, core customer services should be accessible from the primary accessible level.
- At least one accessible consultation position (low consult pod) should also be located on the accessible level.
- Promotional displays may not obstruct accessible walkways.
- Temporary merchandising must comply with accessibility route requirements.
- Maintain unobstructed wheelchair turning spaces at all times.
- Wide aisles for wheelchairs and mobility aids.
- Designated seating and resting spots.
- Minimise lighting glares, sound, clutter to prevent sensory overload, but still provide good visibility for customers.
- Include information of accessible products and services on digital screens.

Train staff

- Train consultants on customer care and attitude.
- How to communicate effectively and empathetically with different disabled. customers to reduce misunderstandings, frustrations, and complaints.
- Be patient, listen to the customer which includes using clear, simple, and respectful language, avoiding jargon, slang - listen actively to what the customer is saying or asking.
- Tip: even if you do not know anything about accessibility, ask the customer" How can I assist."
- Ask line manager or support areas for help.

Respect personal space: Never touch, lean on, or move mobility devices like wheelchairs, walkers, or service animals without clear permission.

- Do not make assumptions about someone's abilities or limitations; every person's disability is different. Focus on removing the barrier, not identifying the disability.
- Speak to your customer, not to the person accompanying him or her. Having a disability does not prevent people from making their own decisions about which products to buy or services to request.
- Provide assistance upon request, e.g., reaching items, navigating store.

Train consultants on accessible technologies, products and services

- Consultants to be knowledgeable on accessible products/services.
- Consultants to be knowledgeable on general products and services.
- Focus on how you showcase products in the store – is it available for purchase?
- If not available, advise customer that the product will be delivered and provide time frames and keep the customer informed.

Guide dogs and service animals

- Allow guide dogs and service dogs to accompany disabled people in store.
- Train security staff to allow service dogs to enter the shop.

Queue Priority

- Prioritise disabled customers in the queue.
- If the disability of a person is visible, fast-track them in the queue.

Phone/device displays

- Live phone (device) displays allow customers - especially those with visual or tactile needs - to test screen readers, magnification, and voice commands before making a purchase.
- It's about giving people the confidence to choose what works best for them.

STORES / SHOPS

Self-service Kiosks	• Accessible self-service kiosks for wheelchair users, short-stature and elderly people. • Self-service kiosks should be positioned reasonably close to staffed service areas where practical, ensuring customers who require assistance can easily access consultant support during self-service interactions.
Customer Feedback	Mechanisms exist for disabled customers to provide feedback of their experiences.

ACCESSIBLE CONTACT CENTRES

Waiting time	To provide direct access to Agents with little waiting time.
Contact centre unique number	Establish a dedicated contact centre with a unique number **OR** utilise the existing call centre number and introduce an IVR Menu item for persons with disabilities – consumers can automatically access the call centre via whitelisting or selecting the relevant option.
Accessible IVR systems	• Provide accessible IVR systems. • Provide user-friendly menu structures. • Use simple and jargon-free language. • Easy access to a human Contact Centre Consultant. • Option to repeat menu choices. • Longer response time before timeout.
Multiple channels	Offer multiple communication channels as an alternative to voice-only communication: Such as voice, email, video calling for sign language users, web chat and WhatsApp/ messaging apps to cater to different communication styles and preferences of disabled consumers.
Train staff	**Train consultants on customer care and attitude** How to communicate effectively and empathetically with customers with various disabilities to reduce misunderstandings, frustrations, and complaints. Be patient, listen to the customer which includes using clear, simple, and respectful language, avoiding jargon, slang - listen actively to what the customer is saying or asking.
	Train consultants on accessible technologies, products and services Consultants to be knowledgeable on accessible products/services.
Include an Accessibility section on the organisation's website	**Add a section to your organisation's website:** Example of Vodacom South Africa website: https://www.vodacom.co.za/vodacom/shopping/v/specific-needs.
	Create a dedicated section on the website to showcase and share information of accessible products, services and solutions for persons with disabilities.
	Include an Accessibility statement: Vodacom is committed to advancing accessibility and disability inclusion to ensure persons with disabilities can participate in a digital society.
	Use sub-titles, transcripts, audio descriptions and sign language in video clips.
Website accessibility	Ensure that designers and developers include accessibility upfront when developing or maintaining the organisation's website to ensure persons with various disabilities can access and use the website and conduct transactions.
	Colours and fonts for contrast and readability.

ACCESSIBLE CONTACT CENTRES

Website accessibility	Ensure keyboard navigation and Alternative Text which describe images for visually impaired users.

ACCESSIBLE EVENTS

Accessible physical events	**Pre-planning/registration -** Ensure that digital event invites are easy to read and accessible for visually impaired persons using screen readers.
	Use the correct disability terminology when communicating details of the event to persons with disabilities.
	Conduct a pre-site assessment of the venue to establish the level of accessibility. Consult Organisations for Persons with Disabilities to ensure that accessibility is appropriately implemented.
	Conduct a planning session with all Service Providers to ensure accessibility is everyone's role and responsibility.
	Accessible infrastructure Accessible entrances and ramps and level infrastructure to venues for people struggling walking and those using mobility aids, wheelchairs.
	Disabled parking bays – bays big enough for wheelchair users.
	Lifts in working order.
	Accessible bathrooms/washrooms with an automated door.
	Brief Support staff about event: Notify Security staff to assist and guide persons with disabilities and companions to disabled parking and to the venue.
	Ensure Security and Centre Management is aware of allowing guide and service dogs to accompany disabled people to the venue.
	Inform catering staff and advise to ask disabled delegates when dishing up food: "How can I assist?".
	Inside the venue: Registration staff must assist delegates with disabilities to register.
	Provide low/appropriate height tables for wheelchair users, elderly and people of short stature when registering for an event.
	Accessible ramp to the stage with the correct incline and rails at the sides for safety – let a wheelchair user test this.
	Provide 'Ramp Assistants' to ensure and support persons with disabilities to navigate the stage safely. Space tables to provide enough space for people using mobility aids and wheelchairs to move around, and remove chairs at tables to make space for wheelchair users.
	Educate event staff how to engage with persons with disabilities and ensure they understand the accessible arrangements. Ensure Sign Language Interpreters are part of events.

ACCESSIBLE EVENTS

Accessible physical events	Hearing and speech impaired persons: Endeavour to provide a real-time caption service – meaning speakers words are captured in real time on the screen or an app which also benefit persons using other languages. **Post the event:** Send a feedback request to delegates and ask questions about the different aspects and accessibility of the event. Compile a summary report of the disability event/roundtable/conference to develop data and serve as a resource for planning other events.
Teams meetings	Inform online attendees of accessibility features of the Teams platform during introduction and welcome. **Live captions:** Show real-time subtitles. **PowerPoint Live in MS Teams:** Enables attendees to access shared content using screen readers and soon, to shift their personal view to high-contrast mode. **Sign Language View:** Pin sign language interpreters so they stay visible on screen regardless of who is speaking. **Transcriptions:** Generate text logs of what was said after a meeting ends. **Live captions and Transcription:** Generates real-time, autogenerated captions with speaker attribution in meetings to assist deaf and hard-of-hearing participants Minimises **background distractions** and isolates the primary speaker's voice to aid focus and clarity. **Screen Reader Support:** Full navigation and compatibility with screen reading software for blind or low-vision users.

SOURCES

Accessibility Standards included in Leasing Agreements: Negotiating ADA Compliance Provisions in Commercial Leases
Identifying disabled-user friendly stores: Understanding ADA-Accessible Entrance Requirements | ADA Requirements for Doors: What You Need to Know
Parking bays: Facilities for the disabled
Location of shops: SANS 10400-S: The application of the National Building Regulations | Part S: Facilities for persons with disabilities
Store layout example: SA Retail store Map.pptm
Internal shop layout: ADA Requirements for Retail Stores: Standards and Compliance | https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/11/Tanzania_Persons-with-Disabilities-Act-2010.pdf
Train staff: https://aoda.ca/what-is-the-customer-service-standard/ | Customer Service Standard | Independent Communications Authority of South Africa: Code for persons with disabilities regulations | Accessibility Standard for Customer Service | Accessibility Hub | The University of Winnipeg
Guide dogs and service animals: Understanding the Rights of Service Dog Users in South Africa - Vondis | Performing Animals Protection Amendment Bill: Explanatory summary: Comments invited
Queue Priority: https://www.vodacom.co.za/vodacom/shopping/v/specific-needs
Phone displays: Independent Communications Authority of South Africa: Code for persons with disabilities regulations
Self-service Kiosks: Interior Design Firms: Understanding SANS 10400 - TKI
Customer Feedback: Make It Easy to Find Help and Give Feedback | Cognitive Accessibility | Design Pattern | WAI | W3C | Providing Accessible Customer Service Feedback
Waiting time: https://www.vodacom.co.za/vodacom/shopping/v/specific-needs
Website accessibility: https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/

Employment of persons with disabilities / inclusive workplace

Promoting an inclusive workplace

1. **Encourage accessibility and disability inclusion advocacy and initiatives** to be led by a person/s with a lived experience of disability.
2. **Develop a Disability Policy** which includes all aspects of disability inclusion in the workplace, i.e. recruitment, reasonable accommodation, self-disclosure, accessible infrastructure, line manager training, promoting performing employees, career growth, mention visible and invisible disabilities.
3. **Ensure HR platforms are accessible** for employees with various disabilities.
4. **Employ qualified persons with disabilities in permanent positions,** do not only rely on learnerships and internships which is often temporary employment programmes.
5. **Develop non-discriminatory job adverts and job assessments**
6. **Promote inclusive hiring** for neurodiverse and persons with disabilities
7. **Provide reasonable accommodation** to promote equal access to opportunities, examples include flexible working hours, remote work, specialised IT technology and software, travel companion, quiet place for neurodiverse employees, automated doors, disabled parking, low access control scanner, low lift buttons, disabled bathroom/washroom.
8. **Develop a simple reasonable accommodation process** to not delay decision making which disadvantages employees with disabilities.
9. **Provide bursaries, internships, discover graduate and learnership programmes** for persons with disabilities.
10. Establish an Employee Resource Group which provides a platform for employees with disabilities voices to be heard, which enables the co-creation of inclusive policies and a disabled-friendly workplace.

Important:

Once employed, develop a CAREER path for employees with disabilities. Provide a mentor, encourage training and skills development and PROMOTE them in relevant positions.

Employ persons with disabilities in leadership/senior/management positions.
The lack of representation of leaders with disabilities reinforces the misconception that leadership is not achievable for persons/employees with disabilities.

When Africa is accessible,
it thrives.
When we design for inclusion,
we design for humanity.






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