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Event Planner Sensitivity to the Needs of Individuals with Visual Disability at Meetings and Events

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Abstract

Special events, such as fairs, conventions, ballgames, and concerts are typically activities people attend to participate in the festivities and enjoy with friends and family members. For individuals with disabilities, however, these types of events can create more challenges than enjoyment. Despite a thorough review of the literature, no studies were found which evaluated the experiences of individuals who are blind and have visual impairments at events and meetings. The aim of this study was to determine the current level of accessibility at meetings perceived by consumers who are blind and visually impaired. Respondents to the survey indicated many obstacles to accessing meetings including: discrimination, a paucity of accessible features, and accessibility features that are not truly accessible for consumers who are blind and visually impaired. Recommendations are provided for increasing meeting and event accessibility for consumers who are blind and visually impaired.

Keywords: Meeting Planners Sensitivity, Visually Impaired, Accessibility to Event Facility, Visual Impairment, Americans with Disabilities Act

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Introduction

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guaranteed persons living with disabilities equal protection under the law regarding access to employment opportunities, public accommodations and places, transportation, and telecommunications. The objective of the ADA was to provide persons with disabilities opportunities to participate in American society as students, employees, consumers, and in many other ways (Causin, Fontenot & Keaty, 2010). Despite the progress made since the ADA was signed into law, people with disabilities are still limited in access to full community life. According to the National Organization on Disability, 35% of Americans with disabilities report that they are completely uninvolved in their communities, compared to 21% of those without disabilities (Causin, Fontenot & Keaty, 2010).

The United States Census Bureau (2000) indicated that approximately 50 million Americans, 19.3 percent of the U.S. population, were people with disabilities and met the criteria established in the ADA (Hanna, 2008; Huh & Singh, 2007). In 2009, the U.S. Census Bureau indicated that 41.2 million Americans had a disability (*U.S. Census Bureau,* 2009), while, in 2010, the Justice Department quoted a figure of 54.4 million. Colucci (2008) reported that results of a 2005 survey conducted for the Open Doors Organization (ODO) and the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) indicated that "21 million adults with disabilities traveled for either business or pleasure in the previous two years. Further . . . the 2002 ODO report indicated these travelers spent a total of $13.6 billion on travel" (p. 22-23). Burns & Graefe (2007) stated that "persons with disabilities are generally presented with more challenges than those without disabilities in regard to recreational pursuits and facilities. These challenges include . . . access to facilities and equipment, [and] the need for individualized services" (p.159).

Twenty years after its passage, the ADA required a new set of standards to take effect. These standards were formulated seven years ago and are officially called the 2010 Standards for Accessible Design. The 2010 Standards set minimum requirements – both scoping and technical – for newly designed and constructed or altered State and local government facilities, public accommodations, and commercial facilities to be readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities (Department of Justice, 2010). These standards were developed specifically to have a major impact on the U.S. Lodging industry particularly in the design of public spaces such as ballrooms, gyms, lobbies, and spas; however, the new standards also target elevators, service-animal policies, and website accessibility. To avoid complaints from attendees or other problems, meeting planners must now become familiar with these new regulations to avoid risk of violation to the standards and inaccessibility to clientele who have disabilities (Sturken, 2012). The following section provides a review of the literature addressing the interface between consumers, who are blind or have visual impairments, and recreational-tourism program designs.

Review of Literature

Disability and Visual Impairment

The term disability usually includes six main types: physical disabilities, intellectual or learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, visual impairments, hearing impairments and neurological disabilities (National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2017; Small, Darcy & Packer, 2012). The term visual impairment is usually defined as a visual acuity of 20/70 or worse in the better eye with correction or a visual field, which subtends 140 degrees (American Foundation for the Blind, 2008). Visual acuity is a number that indicates the sharpness or clarity of vision. A visual acuity measurement of 20/70 means that a person with

20/70 vision who is 20 feet from an eye chart sees what a person with unimpaired (or 20/20) vision can see from 70 feet away. 20/70 can best be understood by examining a standard eye testing chart that an individual may have used in their own doctor's office during an eye examination (Duffy, 2017). In practical terms, a visual impairment can be defined as a loss of vision that is significant enough to make activities of daily life (i.e., cooking, reading, traveling independently) difficult (American Foundation for the Blind, 2008). One in six Americans aged sixty-five and older are blind or sufficiently impaired to be considered legally blind, which is defined as a visual acuity that is 20/200 or worse in the better eye with correction or a visual field which subtends 20 degrees. This population is expected to more than double by 2030 (American Foundation for the Blind, 2004; National Eye Institute, 2006; Mills, Han & Clay, 2008).

Although the phrases "legally blind" and "totally blind" are used interchangeably by schools, colleges, and other educational institutions to describe students with visual impairments, they are more specifically defined as follows (Oliver, 1996):

- Low vision generally refers to a severe visual impairment that impacts the way an individual approaches activities of daily life. Individuals with low vision use a combination of vision and other senses to learn, although they may require adaptations in lighting or the size of print, and, sometimes, braille;

- Myopic describes the vision of individuals unable to see distant objects clearly, commonly called near-sighted or shortsighted;

- Hyperopic describes the vision of individuals unable to see close objects clearly, commonly called far-sighted or longsighted;

- Legally blind indicates that a person has less than 20/200 vision in the better eye after correction (contact lenses or glasses), or a field of vision of less than 20 degrees; and,

- Totally blind individuals learn via through braille or other media.

Many studies have addressed the accessibility for people with disabilities. Most of them have focused on the access to buildings (i.e. public library, university library, and museum) and government websites. More specifically, these studies include the study of accessibility to parking lots (number of spots, distance between the disability spots and the main area), ramps, interior layout, and public sites (corridor width, height of door handles, telephones, water cooling systems, direction finders, and tables) (Oliver, 1996). In contrast to the challenges mentioned, other disability-related studies provide a different perspective. For instance, the studies reflecting a medical model of disability tend instead to focus on the physical impairment of the body to a socially constructed disability model. This focused on the difference between the physical impairment and the socially structured disability (Oliver, 1996).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers began studying the relationship between tourism and disabilities (Driedger, 1987; Murray and Sproats, 1990; Muloin & Clarke, 1993). Researchers purported that individuals with disabilities were facing a great number of barriers and obstacles, which were classified into three categories: environmental barriers, which includes attitudinal and architectural incongruities; interactive barriers, which relate to skill incongruities and communication barriers; and intrinsic barriers associated with each disability's own physical, psychological, or cognitive functioning level. Of all these, intrinsic barriers, associated with cognitive functioning, were reported to be the most influential factor (McGuire, 1984; Murray and Sproats, 1990; Smith, 1987; Yau, McKercher & Packer, 2004) because cognitive ability affects the ability to conceptualize the environment in the absence or reduction of visual information (University of Hertfordshire, 2016).

Tourism and Visually Impaired Individuals

According to the World Health Organization (2004), there are about 650 million people with disabilities in America, and 50 million of these individuals with disabilities are visually impaired. More than 82% of people who are blind are 50 years or older, and the number of people with visual impairment is expected to increase as a result of increasing lifespan. However, individuals with visual impairments are less likely to travel than individuals in any other disability category (Small, Darcy & Packer, 2012). While many variables may play a role in the low numbers of individuals who are blind and visually impaired who travel, providing access to travel opportunities increases the market. Individuals who are blind and visually impaired are an important niche for tourism and to plan for a growing and more actively engaged population, leaders in the field of recreation and tourism must increase their knowledge and awareness of what is needed to enhance the process of travel for consumers who are blind or visually impaired.

Purpose of the Study

Despite a thorough review of the literature, no studies were found that examined the experiences of individuals who are blind and have visual impairments at meetings or social events. The aim of this study is to examine the perceptions of the degree of accessibility at meetings and events by consumers who are blind and visually impaired. Findings from this survey will be used to inform meeting and event planners about the needs of individuals who are blind and visually impaired.

Methodology

A non-experimental, descriptive survey was utilized for this study. According to Gay and Airasian (2003), "typical survey studies are concerned with assessing attitudes, opinions,

preferences, demographics, practices and procedures" (p.277). Since the intent of this study is to identify the needs of individuals with visual impairments, a survey was most appropriate. Conducting research with large numbers of participants who are blind and visually impaired is virtually impossible as it involves recruiting a large percentage of the total population (Wright, 2010). For this reason, the number of respondents to the survey was small compared to surveys conducted with other populations.

This survey was sent to three LISTSERVs of organizations that are comprised of or served individuals with disabilities: National Federation of the Blind (NFB); American Council of the Blind (ACB); and Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AERBVI). Email addresses for these LISTSERVs are publicly available online on organizational websites. The investigators sent the emails to the three sites, which included an estimated total of five hundred email addresses.

No personal information was collected from the participants. The items on the questionnaire specifically addressed experiences participants have had when attending meetings, events, conferences, and conventions. Two demographic questions were included: (1) Do you have a visual impairment; and (2) Do you consider yourself blind? The participants were allowed to provide their names and contact information if they would like to be available for follow-up, but provision of this information was optional. Surveys were stored on the investigators' password protected computer. Participants' names and contact information were shared only with the investigators.

Participants were requested to complete an electronic survey in a Word document form, which asked questions about their experiences with meetings and events. Appendix A shows the details of the survey questions. Then the participants were asked to email the survey back to the

principal investigator (PI). If any of the participants preferred a paper copy of the form to be mailed to them (either in print or braille), the participants had the option of contacting the PI. The paper form in the preferred medium was then mailed to the participant along with a postage paid envelope. The survey completion time was approximately 30 minutes. After the initial survey was mailed, two reminders were sent via the LISTSERV contacts to which the survey was originally mailed. Of the 25 paper surveys mailed, only five (20%) were returned; 23 usable responses were analyzed. Small number of usable responses is typical for this sample (Wright, 2010).

Participants were assigned a code number that was used rather than a name for data entry. Electronic documents were stored in a folder on a password protected computer. Paper surveys were stored in a locked file cabinet. Participants were provided the option, and not required to provide their name on the surveys. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln.

Results

Profile of the Respondents

One hundred percent of the respondents (n=23) considered themselves to have a visual impairment; 80% (n=18) considered themselves to be blind. Twenty percent (n=5) of respondents did not consider themselves as blind, although they met the definition of legal blindness. In terms of the frequency of travel, 76% (n=17) of the respondents typically traveled more than three times per year and the remaining (24%) (n=6) traveled once or twice per year. The majority of the respondents usually travel to meetings, conferences, and conventions alone (83%; n=19), but some chose to travel with a companion (17%; n=4). The companion was

usually a spouse. Among those who travelled with a companion, the majority of travel companions (57%) were reportedly not visually impaired or blind; 33% reported that the companion had a visual impairment. Ten percent of the respondents sometimes travelled with a companion who was not visually impaired and sometimes travelled with a companion who was visually impaired. In terms of additional disabilities, 88% (n=20) of the respondents did not report any other disabilities; 12% (n=3) reported having additional disabilities. Additional reported disabilities included epilepsy and hearing loss.

Meeting Logistics

Respondents reported traveling to meetings, events, conferences, and conventions in a variety of locations. These events were held in hotels (57%; n=13), convention centers (20%; n=5), churches (14%; n=3) and other facilities, such as office buildings (9%; n=2). Meetings and events were also held in public buildings, libraries, community halls, homes, and on college campuses. Respondents were asked whether they received onsite orientation regarding the layout of the meeting location. Orientation was not typically provided. Sixty-eight percent (68%; n=16) of the respondents did not receive any orientation upon arrival; 16% (n=4) received some kind of orientation; and 16% (n=4) experienced a thorough and detailed orientation. When an orientation was provided, it was provided by: hotel staff (44%; n=10); host organization event coordinator (28%; n=6); family/friend (8%; n=2); and conference volunteers (4%; n=1). One respondent indicated that he had never been asked if an orientation was needed. Another respondent indicated that sometimes the orientation that was offered was not very helpful "since few people are skilled in the fine art of giving accurate directions." Most respondents, who made additional comments, indicated they usually solicit this help as opposed to it being offered.

Accessibility to Event Facility

Respondents were asked to rate the ease with which they were able to find restrooms, meeting rooms, and other amenities when they attended these types of events (i.e., one being "very easily"; five being "with great difficulty"). One hundred percent (100%; n=23) of the respondents indicated that it is with great difficulty that they find these meeting facilities. In addition, the respondents commented that reported difficulty is due to the absence of detailed instructions such as providing a lay-out of the various meeting rooms and facilities from the meeting organizers or convention facility planner. The respondents were also asked to rate the ease with which they typically found places to eat while attending meetings and events (i.e., five being "with great difficulty"; one being "with great ease"). The majority (76%; n=18) of the respondents indicated that they experienced great difficulty when finding places to eat. Only 24% of the respondents indicated that they could easily find places to eat. The respondents who indicated they found places to eat with ease were typically with someone who could see and helped them find the place to eat. In addition, if the meeting or event was organized by the American Council of the Blind (ACB), a consumer group of individuals, who are blind and visually impaired, the participants were confident that they would be able to easily find places to eat.

The respondents were asked to rate the accessibility of eateries (e.g., braille menus) while attending meetings and events (one being "not at all accessible" and five being "very accessible"). Eighty-eight percent (80%; n=18) of the respondents indicated that eateries, such as restaurants, were not at all accessible in terms of the menus. Only 12% (n=3) of the respondents indicated the experience of identifying eateries, which were accessible to the blind and visually impaired. The respondents reported a desire that these eateries/restaurants had audio menus

available since not all individuals who are blind and visually impaired read braille. Participants reported that it was very rare for hostesses or servers to offer a braille menu automatically. Larger chain restaurants usually had braille menus, but braille takes up much more space than print. This led one respondent to comment that it could be quite time consuming to work through 20 or 30 pages to find what the menu offered. Some respondents indicated that the braille menus, which had a table of contents, were most useful, allowing the consumer to flip right to drinks, desserts, sandwiches, poultry, or other meal categories.

Accessibility to Event Staff

The respondents were asked to rate the ease of finding individuals who were able to provide them with assistance when they needed it (one being "very easily" and five being "with great difficulty"). Fifty-four percent (54%; n=12) of the respondents indicated that they could easily find help when needed, 25% (n=6) reported it was somewhat easy and somewhat difficult, and 21% (n=5) of the respondents indicated that it was difficult to find help when needed. The ease with which consumers, who were visually impaired, were able to solicit assistance depended on the individual's comfort level with asking for assistance. When the respondents were asked, who typically provides the assistance when they need it, 36% (n=8) received help from the hotel staff, 19% (n=4) received help from meeting attendees, 24% (n=6) received help from members of the host organization, 9% (n=2) received help from volunteers, 7% (n=2) received help from family and friends, and 5% (n=1) received help from the general public.

Knowledge of Staff about Individuals with Visual Impairments

The respondents were asked to rate the knowledge of individuals who provided assistance to individuals who were blind or visually impaired (i.e., one being "very little knowledge"; five

being "a lot of knowledge"). The majority (92%; n=21) of the respondents revealed that those individuals who provided service or assistance to them had very little knowledge about giving assistance to individuals who are blind or visually impaired. In addition, the respondents said that the community at large lacks education and knowledge in terms of how to provide assistance to individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Only 8% (n=2) of the respondents indicated that those individuals who helped them had knowledge about providing assistance to those who are blind or visually impaired.

The respondents were asked to rate the comfort level of individuals who provided assistance to individuals who are blind or visually impaired (i.e., one being "very uncomfortable"; five being "very comfortable"): 75% (n=17) of the respondents indicated that those individuals who provided assistance to the individuals, who are blind or visually impaired, were uncomfortable when they were with the respondents. Only 25% (n=6) of the respondents indicated that those individuals who provided assistance were comfortable. Respondents indicated that although individuals were often uncomfortable or did not provide optimal assistance, individuals were happy to provide assistance. The exception to this was when the consumer who was blind or visually impaired was traveling with a dog guide. Not all hotel staff were educated on the laws surrounding service animals.

Overall Event Experience

Eighty-seven percent (87%; n=20) of the respondents indicated that their overall meeting/event experiences were mediocre. The remaining 13% (n= 3) of the participants indicated reported terrible experiences. Respondents were asked to comment on past positive experiences. These experiences seemed to occur when individuals organizing and attending the event, as well as other employees of the facility, were willing to help. Conferences, which were

focused on blindness and visual impairments such as consumer group meetings, and conferences for professionals in the field of blindness, yielded more positive experiences. Traveling with a sighted companion led to more positive experiences. Respondents also indicated addition key components of positive experiences included: having an orientation, including where dog guides could be walked, fostered positive experiences; the individual, who is blind or visually impaired, would choose to mention the disability ahead of time and become connected with the department for accessibility; and the individual, who is blind or visually impaired, maintain a sense of humor, "laughing off" accidents and vision-related problems.

The negative experiences reported by participants most commonly included instances of inaccessibility and discrimination. According to Your Dictionary (August 17th, 2017, from http://www.yourdictionary.com/discrimination), discrimination is defined as distinguishing differences between things or treating someone as inferior based on their race, sex, national origin, age or other characteristics. For this instance, the visual impaired guests were being treated differently (NJ Office of the Attorney General, 2015) because of their characteristics. Respondents reported their negative experiences were often related to poor accessibility. such as poor lighting in meeting rooms and hotel rooms. Although braille signs are required as a part of ADA, only about 10% of individuals, who are blind and visually impaired, read braille. Accessible hotel rooms are typically modified to be helpful to individuals who use wheelchairs, but this accessibility does not typically extend to the same degree as to those with visual impairments.

The accessibility needs of individuals, who are blind and visually impaired, are distinctively different than the needs of an individual who use a wheelchair. Meeting materials, such as name tags, were rarely accessible and presenters often did not provide presentation

materials in an accessible format or provided the materials electronically after the meeting ended, which did not allow the consumer to access the presentation materials at the same time as other attendees. Examples of accessible formats are large print, audio, and braille. Large print documents should have a minimum font size of 16, but ideally 18 sans serif type face such as Arial, Helvetica or Verdana. Audio should be clear and there is no background noise in various formats such as CD, MP3 and WAV (Disable Access Day, 2016). Respondents reported that few individuals, who offered assistance, knew the proper techniques for guiding someone who is blind or visually impaired. Several respondents also reported discrimination in a variety of ways. Many consumers were banned from or had difficulty bringing their dog guide into facilities, were ignored, heard other individuals making rude comments, or were stared at or given strange looks by employees of the facilities.

In summary, planning trainings, meetings, and conferences that are accessible to people with disabilities involves focusing on the accessibility of all aspects of the meeting from choosing a site through promotion, registration, presentations, and handouts. The meeting planner must also work to ensure access to both the physical environment as well as access to the information which will be presented. Doing so will assure that any person with a disability will have full and equal access to the facility and proceedings (CDC, 2010).

Discussion

Since approximately 50 million Americans, almost 20 percent of the U.S. population, have been identified as having at least one disability as designated by the ADA (Hanna, 2008; Huh & Singh, 2007), individuals who are blind and visually impaired are an important demographic to consider when planning meetings and other events. In the present survey, the

results indicated that while some individuals have had positive experiences during meetings and events, especially those which were planned by a consumer group or other organization which works with individuals with visual impairments on a regular basis, many individuals' experiences have been negative. The responses, however, indicate some relatively simple changes, which could make meetings and events much more accessible to individuals who are visually impaired.

One recommendation is to make sure locations are labeled in accessible formats. While ADA requires signage to be accessible, this is often interpreted to mean there must be a braille equivalent of the print sign. This is important and a meaningful step toward accessibility, but it does not ensure accessibility for all individuals who are blind and visually impaired. Individuals, who read braille, need to be able to find the signs in order to read them. This means the braille must be located in a logical, consistent place, otherwise, the braille sign may go unnoticed. Also, only a small percentage of individuals who are blind or visually impaired read braille. The majority of individuals with a visual impairment, even if considered legally blind, have enough vision that they choose to read print with a magnification device or large print rather than braille. This means braille signage is not accessible to these individuals. For these individuals, a sign with large, clear letters, high contrast, and a font without serifs (Hanna, 2008; Huh & Singh, 2007). In typography, a serif (/ˈsɛrɪf/) is a small line attached to the end of a stroke in a letter or symbol. A typeface with serifs is called a serif typeface (or serifed typeface). A typeface without serifs is called sans-serif or sans serif, from the French *sans*, meaning "without" (Wikipedia, 2017). A font without serifs or sans serif would be more generalizable to a broader population (Hanna, 2008; Huh & Singh, 2007).

Sometimes audio signs are the best way to make signs accessible. These devices allow a message to be recorded such as: "Men's Restroom." The device has a motion sensor that triggers the recording to play. Because the devices allow for easy recording, erasing, and rerecording, the devices can be customized and used only when there are attendees with visual impairments. It is recommended that these accessibility measures not be limited to signage. Any information, including the information provided to guests in hotel rooms, needs to be available in a variety of formats. Materials could be distributed electronically to individuals who are visually impaired ahead of time so the individual can access the materials in the way that is most appropriate. Microsoft Word documents are easy to create and share and usually very easily accessible by individuals who are blind and visually impaired (Gaunt, 2012).

Training hotel and event staff in disability awareness and skills is another important way to improve accessibility and the experience of attendees who are blind and visually impaired. The basic skills can usually be covered in a brief in-service training. One of the most important skills to teach staff is how to be a safe and courteous human guide to individuals who are blind and visually impaired. There are simple, specific techniques that make the experience of guiding and being guided much safer and more graceful. These techniques allow the individual being guided to retain control rather than being at the mercy of the person offering assistance (CDC, 2010).

Another important area for training is providing meaningful directions to individuals who are visually impaired. Often, when directions are provided to individuals with typical vision, the directions are vague and accompanied by pointing. This is usually not meaningful to someone with low or no vision. Directions need to be provided in a specific manner, making use of landmarks with which the individual is familiar or will not be able to miss. Directions can also be

given using the analogy of a clock face (e.g., if you are facing twelve o'clock, the escalator is about 20 feet away at seven o'clock) Once staff members have been trained in key skills, it is important to have a full staff on hand to provide assistance. This is especially important at key times such as when individuals with visual impairments are moving between sessions, navigating vendor booths, or trying to take food from a buffet.

Another key recommendation, which resulted from the survey, is the importance of accessible presentation materials. Preferably, presenters should send electronic versions of the materials to individuals who are blind and visually impaired before the event. If this is not possible, the presenter should have large print and braille materials available at the time of the presentation. Sending materials to attendees with visual impairments after the presentation is better than no accommodation, but it does not provide equal, timely access. If a presenter is sharing PowerPoint slides or another type of visual presentation, it is important that the visual aspects (e.g., graphs, charts, and pictures) are explained in detail for individuals who are blind and visually impaired. This is usually a good feature of universal design. Most attendees, whether visually impaired or not, would typically have a more positive attendance with information presented through a number of different modalities either before or after the actual presentation (CDC, 2010).

These suggested changes are simple and are usually available at low or no cost and significantly improve the accessibility, bringing hosts of meetings and events into compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) stipulates that public facilities must make reasonable modifications to avoid discrimination in their policies, practices and procedures, which includes ensuring that such facilities are physically accessible to people with disabilities (CDC, 2010). When

recommendations cannot be followed, it is always best to simply ask an individual who is blind or visually impaired about the individual's preferences. If someone offers assistance as a guide, but does not know how to act as a proficient guide, the individual offering assistance can simply ask the person with a visual impairment how he or she would prefer to be guided. The same policy is true when giving the individual directions or creating accessible materials. The label blind or visually impaired can be applied to a myriad of individuals. The individuals have different needs and strategies for navigating the world. It is always of the utmost importance to simply ask the person to explain how to best be of service (Gaunt, 2012).

Sensitivity training regarding interactions with and attitudes towards individuals with special needs must be required for the event and venue staff (Shea, 2012). For example, The Hyatt Regency Minneapolis provides blind-sensitivity training to their hotel staff, from housekeepers to food servers to managers in preparation for the Visions Conference. The training includes role-playing where one employee wears a mask and another without playing the roles of a visually impaired guest and the other the guide. Hotel staff also role-play typical dining scenarios wherein the ones served are blind or visually impaired (Shea, 2012). When speaking to an individual who is visually impaired, the volume of speech should be normal and speech should be directed to the individual who is visually impaired. The tone of voice should be the same as if it would be for any other individual; visually impaired attendees should not be shouted at or talked to as if they are children. The more the professional event coordinator knows about the meeting attendees, the more positively evaluated the service will be by all (Silvers, 2012).

Conclusion

A number of countries have some form of legislation that prohibits discrimination based on disabilities, such as the Disability Discrimination Acts in the United Kingdom and Australia and the Persons with Disabilities Acts in Canada and India (Silvers, 2012). In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications. The law applies to persons who have impairments that substantially limit major life activities such as seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, caring for oneself, and working (Fenich, 2012; Silvers, 2012).

Compliance with the accessibility legislation can affect the professional event coordinator in number of ways, primarily in site selection and development and the provision of auxiliary aids. Accessibility legislation typically covers public accommodations (i.e. private entities that own, operate, lease, or lease to places of public accommodation), commercial facilities, and private entities that offer certain examinations and courses related to educational and occupational certification. This means that both the facility and the entity sponsoring an event at the facility are responsible for compliance. Nine hundred hotels under the Hilton Worldwide Inc. brands will ensure that all properties meet accessibility standards and include accessible rooms for at all class levels (Diament, 2010). The event coordinator should ensure that the site selected is architecturally compliant and that the program is communications compliant (Silvers, 2012).

According to Silvers (2012), supplementary aids to ensure effective communication with individuals with vision impairments may include such services or devices as qualified interpreters, assistive listening headsets, readers, materials in braille, and large-print materials. Barrier-free building and site elements may include parking, loading zones, accessible routes,

ramps, stairs, elevators, doors, thresholds, drinking fountains, bathrooms, controls and operating mechanisms, storage areas, seating, TDD and volume-control telephones, and assisted evacuation areas may also be required. Whether required by law or not, failure to consider and make arrangements for those with visual, or other special needs is discrimination by neglect.

The event and its site must be accessible to all those invited to attend such as guests, attendees, and/or audience; those required to attend such as staff, suppliers or vendors; and those expected to attend such as the participants, performers and volunteers. It must accommodate people with special needs such as the individuals with visual impairment by providing special services to ensure that all blockades or obstacles are diminished or eradicated. The professional event coordinator must safeguard that the event and event site are accessible (Silvers, 2010) particularly to individuals with visual disability and must have sufficient and appropriate ingress, egress and access (Silvers, 2012).

Accommodating individuals with special needs requires common sense and general sensitivity to the issues surrounding a special need. The individual with special needs is the best person to help determine what form an adjustment should take. Event planners and organizers should ask for special needs requests and accommodate them in a nondiscriminatory manner (Silvers, 2012). For meeting and event professionals, it is imperative that accommodating attendees with disabilities must be integrated throughout the event plan. It is the responsibility of the professional event coordinator to inform speakers, exhibitors, and staff that they need to prepare special handouts and audio technology for the attendees who are visually impaired (Silvers, 2012) if this discipline is to maintain a commitment to the ADA.

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Appendix A

EVENT PLANNER SENSITIVITY STUDY ACCORDING TO THE INDIVIDUALS WITH
VISUAL IMPAIRMENT SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you have a visual impairment?
    a. Yes
    b. No

2. Do you consider yourself blind?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Additional comments:

3. How often do you travel to meetings, events, conferences, and conventions?
    a. Not at all
    b. Once or twice a year
    c. Three to five times a year
    d. More than five times a year

Additional comments:

4. Do you usually travel to meetings, conferences, and conventions alone or with a companion?
    a. Yes
        i. Alone
        ii. With a companion
    b. No

Additional comments:

5. If you travel with a companion, is your companion blind/visually impaired?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Sometimes

6. Do you have any additional disabilities?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Additional comments:

7. When you travel, to meetings, events, conference, and conventions, where are these events usually held?

8. How would you rate the orientation you typically receive to the layout of the location where the event is being held? (One being "I do not receive any orientation" and five being "Very thorough and detailed")

   Additional comments:

9. Who typically performs this orientation to the physical layout of the location where the event is being held?

10. How would you rate the ease with which you are able to find restrooms, meeting rooms, etc. when you attend these types of events? (one being "very easily" and five being "with great difficulty")

    Additional comments:

11. How would you rate the ease of finding individuals who are able to provide you with assistance when you need? (one being "very easily" and five being "with great difficulty")

    Additional comments:

12. When you seek assistance, who typically provides this assistance?

13. How would you rate the knowledge of individuals who provide assistance to individuals who are blind or visually impaired? (one being "very little knowledge" and five being "a lot of knowledge")

    Additional comments:

14. How would you rate the comfort level of individuals who provide assistance to individuals who are blind or visually impaired? (one being "very uncomfortable" and five being "very comfortable")

    Additional comments:

15. How would you rate the ease with which you typically can find places to eat while attending meetings and events? (one being "with great difficulty" and five being "with great ease")

    Additional comments:

16. How would you rate the accessibility of eateries (e.g., braille menus, etc) while attending meetings and events? (one being "not at all accessible" and five being "very accessible")

17. Would you like to tell us about any particularly positive experiences?

18. Would you like to tell us about any particularly negative experiences?

19. If one is a terrible meeting/event experience and five is a perfect meeting/event experience, where would you rate most of your meeting/event experiences?

   Additional comments:

20. If you had the opportunity to talk to someone who plans meetings and events for a living, what would you ask them to consider in their efforts to make events/meetings more accessible for individuals who are blind or visually impaired?