



A Basic Guide to Organising Events for *All*

● by Sylviane Jeanty ●

Who will be the participants of your next workshop, seminar or training course? How can you make sure that all people, including those with disabilities or reduced mobility, can gain access and feel comfortable during the event? Here are a few tips to keep in mind.

For anybody organising an event, whether a conference, a training course or a sports event, the prime consideration is how to attract a large number of participants or spectators.

Very often there is a tendency to overlook a whole section of the population which consists of some 37 million individuals throughout Europe. These are Europe's elderly people, people with motor deficiencies, partially sighted or blind people, hearing impaired or deaf people, and people with mental disorders, who are often accompanied by their friends and family.

It is true that catering for these people with so-called reduced mobility requires a little more thought at the organisational level. However, with a degree of good will and an open mind, the obstacles to organising an event for all are far from insurmountable and tackling them may bring a great deal of satisfaction to the organiser and, of course, the other participants.

This kind of approach will also most certainly be appreciated by people with disabilities themselves, who will feel welcome and comforted in their right to be fully involved and subsequently cite the event as an example.

What to do?

Most countries have organisations run by or for people with disabilities or information centres specialising in this type of issue. These associations will be delighted to give you advice and guidance, provide you with the necessary information or even help you with the measures required.

The information they provide is essential for catering for people with disabilities because it concerns the accessibility of the venue chosen for an event.

“Accessibility is made up of access to the built environment, communication and information. It is not just about providing a ramp for wheelchair users. It is about creating an environment that everybody feels comfortable using. This includes people with impairments, such as deaf, deaf-blind and hearing impaired people, people with learning difficulties, people with mobility impairments (including elderly people), wheelchair users, blind and visually impaired people and people with sensory impairments, epilepsy and dyslexia. It also includes pregnant women, families with children, people with pushchairs, people with overweight or people carrying parcels or luggage.

An environment is accessible provided that everyone can:
Reach the site and the venue - Get into the venue -
Use all the facilities.“ (1)

When people come across the issue of accessibility for the first time, they inevitably have great difficulty in understanding and interpreting this somewhat abstract term.

What does accessibility mean in practical terms?

An analysis of the accessibility of a site's buildings, fixtures and fittings boils down to a description of a number of key elements such as:

The car park - Are there reserved spaces for people with disabilities? If not, is it possible to reserve spaces near the main entrance?

Signposting - Is the route to the venue in which the event is taking place clearly marked and easy for everyone to follow?



The path between the car park and the entrance - Is the ground flat? What kind of surface is it? Are there any obstacles which might hinder a blind person and could be removed?

The building entrance - Steps can pose problems for people in wheelchairs or on crutches, elderly people, people with pushchairs, pregnant women, etc.

Is there another entrance at ground level or a ramp or lift? What kind of doors are there and how wide are they?

The main room - How do you get there? If there is a lift, what are its dimensions? Is there enough room between tables? Might it be advisable to move some of the furniture to provide more manoeuvring space? Is information provided in different forms (written, oral, etc)?

Cafes and restaurants - Where are they? Is there enough room to move around freely? Are some of the menus in large print?

Toilets - Are there toilets for the disabled? Where are they? If not, how are the toilets laid out, what are the dimensions?

Assistance - Is someone available to help and does the person have experience in dealing with people with disabilities? How does one contact this person?

...

Once this list has been worked through, certain practical questions need to be resolved:

How to reach the target audience?

When advertising the event it will be enough to provide information on the accessibility of the site or include full details on your Internet site. This will enable persons with reduced mobility to decide in full knowledge of the facts whether they feel able to attend the event.

What to do if the event lasts more than one day?

Access to transport, accommodation and related activities will need to be taken into account. Transport frequently poses problems for people with disabilities and, unfortunately, individual transport arrangements still have to be made in many cases. Where accommodation is concerned, bathroom and toilet facilities are often the crucial factor.

The initial consideration should always be the accessibility of the built environment, which is fundamental to the integration of people with disabilities. However, there are still a number of "psychological" barriers such as fear or stereotypes which also hamper acceptance of people with disabilities. Ill-considered behaviour can be a factor contributing to their isolation.

Let us take the example of a person with impaired hearing who decides to attend an event. The person in question can get into the building, but if the means of imparting information are unsuitable, this will have serious consequences: he or she will not register information at the same time as the other

participants and therefore will be unable to react promptly to the various situations which might arise. This will add to his or her sense of isolation.

How to react to a disabled person?

The important thing to remember is that, once you have got over the first hurdle, the rest is just two human beings communicating. To help dispel any apprehension, here are a few tips which will aid communication with people with disabilities:

- Speak to the persons concerned and not the people accompanying them;
- Learn to communicate without prejudice;
- Focus attention on the persons themselves and not their disabilities;
- Offer help if it is requested, respecting the person's wishes.

If you bear in mind the few items of advice outlined in this article, it is likely that your event will be a success and that it will have helped you to learn a little more about the issue while gaining an enormous amount of satisfaction from it.



Source: Millennium Access Guide

Contact address: Info-Handicap, PO Box 33, L-5801 Hesperange, Tel. +352/ 366 466, Fax: +352/ 360 885; e-mail: info@iha.lu, <http://www.info-handicap.lu/>

Bibliography

- (1) Handicap & liberté de circulation (Disability and freedom of movement), produced by ALPE (Spain), CO.IN (Italy), CNAD (Portugal), CNRH (France), Info-Handicap (Luxembourg), MI (Switzerland) and Mobility International, with the support of the European Commission, DG V. A European reference guide and training manual for tourism professionals to meet the specific needs of tourists with disabilities. Available at <http://www.info-handicap.lu/freedom/>
- (2) Millennium Access Guide, 'people with disabilities' International, European Committee, United Kingdom
- (3) Access, European Youth Forum and Mobility International (editor in chief - Tobias Flessenkemper). Publication on ways of helping people with disabilities to get involved in international youth activities, available from the European Youth Forum.