Highlighting innovations, maximizing inclusive practices and overcoming barriers to employment for people with disabilities

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On February 8, Jenny Lay-Flurrie, Microsoft's Chief Accessibility Officer, testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions for a hearing "Lessons Learned from COVID-19: Highlighting Innovations, Maximizing Inclusive Practices and Overcoming Barriers to Employment for People with Disabilities." Read Jenny Lay-Flurrie's written testimony below and watch the hearing here.

Chair Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today to share Microsoft's perspective on closing the disability divide in employment. My name is Jenny Lay-Flurrie, and I am Microsoft's Chief Accessibility Officer. I've been based for the

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last 15 years in our Redmond, Washington, headquarters, where I founded and chaired our Disability Employee Resource Group for over 10 years. I'm proud of how Microsoft has empowered me as a deaf disabled female leader. In addition, I serve on the board of Disability:IN, Gallaudet University, and Team Gleason.

At Microsoft, we believe that disability is a strength, and by leaning into the principles of inclusive design and the lived experience of the disabled, we have created an ecosystem of accessibility to help tackle the Disability Divide,[1] including persistent disparities in employment. This starts with hiring and supporting people with disabilities, goes to embedding their insights and expertise into product, website and building development, through to creation of innovative technology that aims to revolutionize what is possible for people with disabilities. This foundation has helped us to respond to the impact of COVID-19, which accelerated the need for accessible technology and disability inclusive practices.

Microsoft has learned a tremendous amount during our decades-long journey regarding accessibility and disability inclusion—learning that has accelerated over the last two years as a direct and indirect result of the pandemic. This work has been informed by the insight and feedback of the disability community, advocates, and non-profit partners. And we know that we still have far to go. We believe the issues related to disability inclusion and the importance of accessibility technology have never been more pressing than they are today. People with disabilities make up one of the world's largest untapped talent pools, but we all need to act with bolder ambition to empower disabled talent to achieve more. Based upon our experience, we believe any disability employment discussion must include three key areas for action:

1. **Reframing disability as a strength.** Too many private and public sector employers rely on dated understandings of disability and what is possible for individuals to achieve.

2. **Driving technology awareness and adoption.** Innovation in accessibility is enabling daily advances in empowering technologies—a rate of innovation that has accelerated as a direct impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. **Accelerating adoption of best practices.** This stems, first and foremost, from always including disability in diversity, and can be realized when we all work actively to address barriers that exist for individuals with disabilities who want to enter the workforce.

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The urgency and import of today's hearing are clear: our economy is experiencing record demand for workers, yet individuals with disabilities still have lower employment and higher rates of poverty than those without disabilities. Moreover, having a disability is something that any of us may experience, since disability can be permanent, situational or temporary. There remain persistent and enduring gaps in employment for individuals with disabilities:

- The unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities remains double that for people without disabilities (10.6% versus 4.9% in the third quarter of 2021), and these rates are even higher for individuals with disabilities of Black, Hispanic or Asian descent.[2] These gaps have not changed substantially since the establishment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990.
- This gap spans education differences: the employment rate for college graduates with disabilities is just 50.6%, compared to the general employment rate for college graduates at 89.9%.[3]
- The COVID pandemic exacerbated this gap, with nearly 1 million people with disabilities—about one in five—losing their jobs.
- During the pandemic we have also seen the emergence or increase of certain disabilities, such as long-term health issues related to COVID, and mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety.[4]

Engaging one of the world's largest untapped talent pools can help to address our current labor market needs and is good value for businesses. A 2018 study done in partnership by Accenture, Disability:IN, and the American Association of People with Disabilities, found that the 45 companies identified as standing out for their leadership in areas specific to disability employment and inclusion had, on average, 28 percent higher revenue, double the net income, and 30 percent higher economic profit margins than their peers over the 4-year period.[5]

This is a pivotal moment for this Committee to consider how technology, business practices, and policy can work together to

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advance employment for individuals with disabilities.

Accessible Technology – Opening doors for people with disabilities

Accessible technology is a fundamental building block that can open doors to bigger opportunities for people with disabilities, tackling barriers to communication, interaction, and information. At Microsoft we start by working to ensure our own products are accessible by design to empower everyone across the spectrum of disability, with many features now built into the devices and software widely available today. This shift–expanding the idea of accessibility technology from being primarily supplemental products created to address and bridge accessibility needs, to encompass integrated features–is foundational to scaling access to the wider world of work. We do this by infusing the insights and feedback from of our disabled employees, accessibility experts, customers and the disability community to build features like Immersive Reader for people who are dyslexic, SeeingAI app for the blind, and the Xbox Adaptive Controller, which empowers gamers with disabilities.

Accessible technology has grown rapidly over the course of the last decade but never more so than in the last two years. COVID-19 and the resulting virtualization of work drove accelerated demand for digital technology to communicate, interact, get information, work, and play. We saw an immediate spike in demand, support questions, and usage of accessibility features. As an example, Microsoft Teams Live Captions unique users skyrocketed, with a 3600% increase during the pandemic; Teams captions has expanded into 28 languages and dialects. Nearly two years in, such trends continue and have driven us to prioritize and accelerate innovation in a few key areas:

- **Content Accessibility.** Americans increasingly need to rely upon electronically generated and transmitted documents at work, home, and especially in the classroom. Making these documents more accessible enables businesses to reach more customers and individuals with disabilities to participate fully in the vital free flow of information. Tools like Microsoft's Accessibility Checker help deliver a new bar of inclusion, making it easy to create documents that are accessible to all those who develop, contribute to, and receive them. In Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, OneNote, Outlook, and Visio, the checker analyses content, providing guidance on how to make the document

accessible. This includes suggested image descriptions for pictures, a feature crucial to blind and low vision users. Since April 2021, we've seen usage of the Accessibility Checker increase by 582%. Now anyone can create and share accessible emails, documents and content using quick and easy tools readily available from the toolbar.

- **Making accessibility easy to find and use.** Great accessibility features are not effective if people can't find them. The input of people with disabilities is critical to making technology accessible to all. As an example, last year Microsoft launched Windows 11. The team started community engagement on day one of the design process. This led to a series of innovations, from new calming sounds and high contrast settings to natural voices for screen reader users and voice access for mobility users. But the most impactful change was likely the simplest. Based on feedback from the community we reconfigured our settings so anyone seeking accessibility on any of our devices, PCs or Gaming can search for "accessibility" and be connected directly to features they need. Accessibility must be easy to find and use.

- **Accessibility in remote meeting tools.** Remote collaboration and meeting tools have become essential to work, life, and play. The pandemic elevated the need for more accessibility features and innovation as users across the disability spectrum moved to virtual environments. Accessibility innovations in Microsoft Teams collaboration and meeting software included specific features for the deaf, expanding AI-provided live captions, adding functionality for CART (Communication Access Real Time Translation), in addition to blur backgrounds, automatic transcription, and the ability to "pin" a specific video to make it easier to view American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter(s). This also includes features such as hand raise, which was imagined by one of our neurodiverse engineers, to promote more inclusive conversations. This ongoing work is an important component of powering the future of work with virtualization and flexibility.

- **Expanded legibility options.** Technology can also enhance access to text understanding for those whose learning, visual, or other disabilities such as dyslexia create barriers to traditional literacy. For example, Microsoft Word can detect and convert text to heading styles crucial for blind and low-vision readers. Navigation panes designed for screen readers can help people easily discover and navigate objects in a spreadsheet in Excel. And tools like Microsoft's Immersive

Reader, which is used by 35 million people every month, can increase comprehension through customizable features including reading screen text aloud, segmenting words, or displaying a few lines of text at a time to help with comprehension.

- **Testing tools.** Innovative development tools can help move the needle on accessibility. For example, Accessibility Insights is a free open-source technology that helps developers test code to find and solve accessibility issues in websites and apps before they reach end users. This enables developers to design for greater access of employees and customers at the front end, when addressing accessibility is simpler and more cost effective.

- **Driving awareness of accessibility and disability practices.** There is always a learning curve with new technologies, and accessibility features are no exception. Training and awareness of disability etiquette through accessibility features is an important part of driving a more inclusive culture. All Microsoft employees around the world are required to take a new Accessibility 101 course, which includes details of how they can be more inclusive in day-to-day work life. We share that training externally, and the UK Government Dept of Work and Pensions is using Microsoft Accessibility Fundamentals to grow skills in their employee base.

- **Providing support when and how people need it**. For the last 8 years, Microsoft has provided support to customers with disabilities, organizations, businesses, and schools through Disability Answer Desk, a dedicated support team for the disabled, answering questions on the latest accessibility features and the use of Assistive Technology in key Microsoft products via phone, chat, ASL support and Be My Eyes (a free app that connects blind and low-vision people with sighted volunteers and company representatives for visual assistance through a live video call). The volume of support calls doubled through the pandemic, and overall, our Disability Answer Desk has received 1 million+ contacts over the past eight years. It is valued by the community, and by us, as a way to help people when, where, and how they need it. Building off this model, Microsoft has shared the Disability Answer Desk Playbook to guide customers on how to develop an inclusive support team for their customers with disabilities.

- For many, assistive technology is out of reach due to cost or lack of connectivity. That's why accessibility is embedded

into the core of our products like Windows 11, Office, and Xbox. However, there is more to do. Microsoft is addressing this in two ways. First, we have created a new Low-Cost Assistive Technology Fund, as part of the AI for Accessibility program, to spark innovation aimed at driving down the cost of assistive digital technology and increasing access to it. Second, in the United States, we are starting focused efforts in our partnerships with internet providers, city governments and community organizations to offer affordable broadband, hardware, software, and digital skills resources to specifically reach people with disabilities. We are beginning that work in in Los Angeles and New York.

There is still much to do to increase the development and use of these and other technology tools that can smoothly integrate technology tools into the daily tasks of work. From our own experience we believe the following are key to an inclusive approach for private and public industry:

- **Listen to people with disabilities.** Communication channels should actively encourage people to participate. All the features above were suggested by employees and/or customers with disabilities to improve products and raise the bar for inclusion.

- **Invest in training**. Widespread information and training are critical to ensuring everyone understands accessible technology features and uses them. It is important to invest time to learn about new features that may benefit individuals, and will grow inclusion broadly, especially for people with disabilities, bearing in mind that roughly 70% of disability is non-apparent.

- **Make use of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning.** AI has the potential to take computing applications to new heights of accessibility. Used and developed responsibly, they can enable critical tools such as Live Captioning.

- **Understand that accessibility isn't just about people with disabilities**. Everyone is part of creating inclusive and accessible materials. Content creators, website developers, anyone who writes emails, word documents, slides, podcasts, and social content – all of us have both the power and the responsibility to make the world more accessible to all.

With these approaches, the private sector, disability advocates, and policy makers can help drive widespread awareness and

adoption of new technologies and shift our collective mindset to understand the importance and relative ease of providing universally accessible tools.

Workforce – Innovative practices that empower talent

Having a diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities is paramount to the Microsoft mission to empower every person and organization on the planet to achieve more. While technology has the power to increase the accessibility of work and all areas of life, we will not move the needle on employment of individuals with disabilities without focused effort. Attracting and retaining a diverse workforce, including individuals with disabilities, means using targeted strategies that acknowledge the strength of people with disabilities and support their needs with centralized global accommodation processes and opportunities for growth in the workplace. Microsoft proactively hires talent with disabilities, with specific hiring programs and strong disability inclusion practices to empower candidates to "come as you are, do what you love."

From a hiring perspective: Key strategies we have employed at Microsoft and which we have seen other companies with similar dedication adopt include:

- **Neurodiversity Hiring Program.** Since 2015, we have been actively recruiting and inclusively onboarding autistic talent through a dedicated program, and in the last year expanded the program to include all neurodiverse talent, which may include Autism Spectrum Disorders, ADD/ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, and learning disabilities. It uses a multi-day hiring approach which includes mock interviews, collaboration and other skills demonstration exercises, and information sessions with managers and existing employees. Final interviews also include specific accommodations, such as longer breaks. For individuals who are selected through this process, Microsoft incorporates training for managers and teammates, as well as support for the new employee. The program has helped Microsoft to successfully hire individuals into numerous technical roles within our company including Software Engineer, Service Engineer, Build Engineer, Lab Engineer, Data Analyst or Data Scientist. We have also invested in sharing our knowledge, partnering with others in industry and non-profit partner Disability:IN to form the Neurodiversity Work Employer Roundtable, which is made up of 42 companies across the United States that

are similarly invested in hiring from this talent pool, collaborating to share best practices.

- **Disability Hiring.** We work accommodation and inclusivity into everyday processes. Microsoft's Disability Hiring approach includes focused recruitment via a dedicated online portal where candidates are invited to apply. These candidates are connected to dedicated staff who have expertise in assisting candidates with disabilities. We also host events to provide a built-in opportunity for candidates with disabilities to attend a one-day interview structured to provide an inclusive experience for individuals. This format enables individuals to best demonstrate their skills in interview settings designed for inclusion, which can include extended interview times, longer breaks between interviews and use of assistive communication technologies or interpreter services. Beyond specific programs, inclusion is built into every step of our hiring process by default, such as inclusive hiring training for managers and interviewers.

- **Disability Representation Metrics**. We are proud to be one of just 20 major companies that publishes our U.S. disability representation metrics in our Diversity and Inclusion Report. As of June 2021, 7.1% of U.S. employees in our core Microsoft business chose to self-identify as having a disability.[6] While we are proud of the progress, there is clearly more to do. Our ambition is to fully represent the population of people with disabilities across the globe, and we take that seriously.

Leveraging our broader corporate footprint. Creating a more accessible world means going beyond our own workplace and working with the broad network of Microsoft suppliers to create a culture of accessibility that will ripple throughout the technology industry and across the entire business community. Actions we have taken at Microsoft to ensure that our major suppliers incorporate accessibility into multiple facets of their work at Microsoft include:

- **Procurement:** Since 2015 we have expressly included accessibility as a factor in our procurement processes and provided a Supplier Toolkit to support suppliers. This includes accessibility fundamentals trainings, resources that introduce accessibility concepts for anyone who manages, designs, creates, or edits digital assets, and technical training resources on implementing accessibility in product design, development, and testing.

- The **Supported Employment Program** creates pathways to job opportunities for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) at Microsoft facilities. Microsoft Real Estate and Facilities (RE&F) partners with vendors and employment agencies, creating job opportunities for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) at Microsoft facilities across the globe. Supported Employees have been hired into over 30 different job types and are part of our campus communities as successful, productive workers in jobs that match their interests and abilities. The program published a toolkit to share learnings from the program with other companies as they explore hiring from the I/DD talent pool.

- **No subminimum wage:** In 2019, Microsoft added language to our Supplier Code of Conduct to reconfirm the obligation to pay the applicable minimum wage to everyone. Microsoft does not support separate wage standards for people with disabilities, and we will not permit subcontractors to pay sub-minimum wages for our work.

Reducing the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is —and must be—a collective effort. Microsoft works closely with organizations like Disability:IN and other non-profit, advocacy and community groups across the US, to share these supply chain best practices and learn from others.

Policy recommendations

In this climate of rapid change, people with disabilities, employers, and federal- and state-funded employment and workforce systems are faced with policies and models that are in many cases even less effective today than 50 years ago. Modernization will require policy change. The scope of policy areas impacting employment is broad and includes policies not only in traditional workforce and education programs, but also programs for veterans and for income support. As a general matter, we recommend policymakers focus on a few key principles:

- **Encourage the widespread adoption of accessible technology.** As Congress considers reauthorizations of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, the Higher Education Act of 2019 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 and other key legislation, it should

focus on the role of technology as a key driver to expanding accessibility.

- **Ensure inclusivity and equity, including through fair pay and equal treatment for individuals with disabilities.** Microsoft supports the bipartisan Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act, which will ensure states and employers help workers with disabilities transition into fully integrated and competitive jobs while phasing out subminimum wages for workers with disabilities, currently allowed under Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

- **Remove barriers and disincentives to work.** Many disabled Americans receive assistance from a web of programs including Workers Compensation, Social Security Disability Income, Supplemental Security Income, Veterans Disability compensation, disability insurance payments, Medicaid, Medicare, and others. Often these programs are crucial to ensure the support needed to maintain independence and health. At the same time, employers and workers can find the need to establish or maintain program eligibility creates work limitations. Policies that enable disabled workers to accept roles, and incentivize increased work opportunities, raises and promotions, while maintaining access to needed supports, are critical to increasing the employment rate.

Conclusion

Technology has the potential to empower and transform employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Innovations designed by and with people with disabilities will lead to more inclusive experiences for everyone. A culture of accessibility, when coupled with technology, leads to breakthrough innovations and a world that makes it easier for people with disabilities to create, communicate, learn, and work.

I am proud to be counted as a disabled female employee in one of America's best companies. Microsoft's recognition of the strengths brought by people with disabilities, not only to our corporation but to our communities more broadly, has been a transformative force in how we meet our mission. We are grateful to the many individuals with disabilities—employees, leaders, advocates, and experts—who have enabled us to learn and grow on this critical journey. And we look forward to continuing to work with industry, policymakers, and the

disability community to imagine, build, and empower the future of disability inclusion and accessibility.

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[1] https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/233

[2] America's Recovery: Labor Market Characteristics of People with a Disability, Oct. 2021 (bls.gov).

[3] Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics – 2020, Feb. 2021 (bls.gov).

[4] Short-term and Long-term Rates of Postacute Sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 Infection: A Systematic Review | Infectious Diseases | JAMA Network Open | JAMA Network; 2021 State of Mental Health in America | Mental Health America (mhanational.org).

[5] Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage, 2018.

[6] Microsoft Diversity & Inclusion Report 2021.