

Accessibility at Conferences for People with Disabilities in Sweden

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Abstract:

This paper is about how to arrange an accessible conference for all. I use a checklist made by The Swedish Agency for Participation.

The work of the Agency is to ensure that disability policy will have an impact in all corners of society. They work on the premise that everyone is entitled to full participation in society, regardless of functional ability. They do this by for example proposing methods, guidelines, guidance and checklists. I use one of them here: “Checklist for arranging accessible conferences”.

Conferences on equal terms for participants and speakers are good start.

Keywords: Accessible conferences, Checklist, Disability, Dyslexia, Democracy

This paper is about how to arrange an accessible conference for all. I use a checklist made by The Swedish Agency for Participation, “Checklist for arranging accessible conferences”. I have also used information from County Administrative Board of Dalarna and Kultur i Väst a County Council.

I start with a story out of life. The conclusion of that is if you don`t check your conference facility in before it might go completely wrong.

This lecture is very practical and on a hands on level. You can copy it and use it at home.

The story out of life: I want to share with you a picture of a book cover with the title “With a wheelchair in the elevator for vegetables,
About hope and optimism in a time of loss and exposure”

The book is an autobiography by Marie Hav Lundkvist. She is a woman like most of us, she is a successful entrepreneur and business woman but she was ill in a neurological disease and became wheelchair-bound with heavy pain. She began to give lectures.

Once she was invited to a conference as a speaker and they had not checked the accessibility and she could not get in to the auditorium. She had to take the elevator for vegetables in the kitchen. Her quote: - "If you are not "normal, you are not existing" And that needs to change.

I want to show you a checklist to send to the conference facility if you have in mind to arrange a conference.

One in five living in Sweden has some form of disability

This may include people with reduced mobility, reading and writing difficulties, disability due to mental health, impaired vision or hearing and disabilities resulting from psychological ill-health.

Everyone should have the same opportunity to share information and to be heard. When people's different experiences and backgrounds meet, the conditions for many different perspectives increase. There is a lot to do for everyone to participate, but it does not have to be difficult! A democratic society is accessible to all. Conferences on equal terms are a good start.

Legislation

The work of The Swedish Agency for Participation is to ensure that disability policy will have an impact in all corners of society. They work on the premise that everyone is entitled to full participation in society, regardless of functional ability. They do this by, for example, proposing methods, guidelines, guidance and checklists. As the one I use here: "Checklist for arranging accessible conferences". Guidelines and checklists are very valuable as a tool for accessibility and it's easy to follow and easy to use. (LSN Library Services to People with Special Needs Section has many guidelines in different subjects.)

The Agency also disseminates knowledge which is important and they provide support and propose measures to government.

They have built up a bank of knowledge on this work, and they track and evaluate developments relating to disability issues. These are based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. They carry out their work in relation to and on behalf of national authorities, municipalities and county councils.

Buildings and facilities owned by Swedish authorities have a stronger legislation and rules. They have to be accessible for all visitors and staff with disability.

We have a law called easily eliminated obstacles, made by Boverket: National Board of Housing, Building and Planning.

Requirements for accessibility in public environments have existed in planning and building legislation since the 1960s. Since 2001, therefore, there are provisions requiring easy remedies to be remedied in premises accessible to the public, public spaces and public places. Easily eliminated obstacles can be stairs, heavy doors, steps etc. both in buildings and outside where the public moves. Increased accessibility in the environment also makes it easier for anyone who uses it.

A lot of conference facilities are under this law.

An elevator is not an easily eliminated obstacle and maybe that's why there was no lift when Marie had to take the vegetable elevator. NO excuse though. Take another conference facility.

Choosing conference premises

When arranging a conference there is much that can be done to ensure that everyone can participate and contribute. Among other things, this means choosing conference premises that are accessible and which can be used by people who for example use wheelchairs. When you start planning your conference it's a good start to send a checklist to the conference facility you have in mind.

Ask about the entrance, indoor and conference rooms/group rooms.

The entrance: A good starting-point is that all the participants shall be able to enter the conference premises through the same entrance. And also that everybody can get out in case of emergency.

Indoors: All of the participants and speakers must be able to make their way to all of the facilities to be used during the conference, for instance, group rooms, restaurants and toilets.

Conference room and group rooms: Everyone must be able to address an audience and participate as a member of the audience. Make sure that there is uniform lighting which does not dazzle and that the room is suitable for people with asthma, allergies or other types of hypersensitivity.

Checklist

- Are door openers available inside and outside?
- Is there a lift?
- Are there any ramps inside and outside?
- Is the environment adapted for people with disabilities?
- Is there a handicap toilet?
- Is there a hearing loop?
- Is there a portable microphone?
- How about Reserved parking place
- Are there plants and flowers, which can cause allergies? It is also important to avoid strongly-smelling flowers or perfumes which can cause allergic reactions.
- Do they have Special food

There are far more questions to be asked. These are examples.

When all this questions are answered you have a good look of the conference facility. Is it suitable for your accessible conference? If these questions had been asked in before, Marie would not have been in an elevator for vegetables.

To plan the Conference

When the conference facility is chosen it is time for planning. Accessibility is affected by how a conference is arranged. I want to share some good advice from the checklist.

- Lectures should not be longer than 45 minutes.
- Breaks between programs or activities are important because the audience, speakers and interpreters can need a rest.
- Is there enough space for participants with wheelchairs
- Portable microphone: so everybody can hear. Don't ask if they can hear just use the microphone
- Sign language interpreter must get a visible location

Inform the speaker in before:

- That it is important to keep the program time
- Speak into the microphone
- Speakers too need to be informed of the importance of describing pictures and reading texts during Power-Point presentations
- Speak clearly and slow enough and in front of the audience. Some people read on the lips

It's a prerequisite for everyone to have equal opportunity to take advantage of the lecture

The conference participants will be given information in an alternative format when other documentation is being distributed – if it has been requested in the registration form. Interpreters are available if necessary.

Here I think it is suitable with a voice from a participant. Anette Gren says: "Since I have reading and writing difficulties, I would like to have the opportunity to read material in advance. A conference with PowerPoint will be easier to keep up with if I have received the material in advance. Then I can get it read with speech synthesis. If the lecturer uses the whiteboard board, black or blue pencils go well, while green and red float with the board" Some points to consider carefully

Some words about printed information

People with impaired vision or dyslexia have difficulties to take part and therefore information must be presented in an available way and in alternative format. Website and all electronic information must be possible to be use with speech synthesis. Talking books in Daisy format are useful for many people.

Writing conference invitations

An accessibility perspective should be an integral part of meeting and conference planning. It is also important to make plans in good time. Think carefully how to write your conference invitation.

- The invitation asks participants if they need a sign language interpreter, audio description or audio equipment.
- The invitation asks the participants if they have any special dietary needs. Give many choices.
- The invitation asks the participants if they need the conference documentation in another format, such as, in digital form on a USB or easily-to-read Swedish.
- The invitation informs the participants that they should avoid perfume and other scented products.
- The invitation contains detailed travelling instructions on how to get to the conference centre.
- Telephone number of the person who can respond to disability at the conference

Summery

Don't forget to ask about accessibility when you are going to arrange a conference. Ask them to answer questions about if it's a facility for all participants. Make a checklist of your own.

Hope you have got some tools and ideas of what to do and how to do.
Your different countries have surely their own checklist.

Hope that Maries can use the same entrance as everybody else and that Anette can follow lectures on her own terms.

A democratic society is accessible to all. Conferences on equal terms for participants and speakers are good start.

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Meetings for everybody. On accessible meetings and conferences everybody can participate.
County Administrative Board of Dalarna

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