SAAVI SERVICES FOR THE BLIND

Bringing Out the Best in Employees:

Practical ADA & Accessibility Strategies That Boost Retention and Performance

Presented by

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SHRM-GT

ROADMAP

What We'll Cover Today

1. **The business case** Why accessibility is a retention strategy, not a compliance line item
2. **Universal design in practice** Real examples (documents, forms, signage) that help every employee
3. **Real examples of inclusive workplace practices** Flex holidays, family-friendly policies, asset-based hiring, immersive onboarding
4. **Inclusive hiring practices** Job descriptions, interviews, and the language that opens doors
5. **Practical accessibility tips** Documents, forms, websites — what to do and what to avoid
6. **How Saavi can help** Free resources, consultation, and the Seeing AI demonstration

ABOUT SAAVI SERVICES FOR THE BLIND

Perspective We Bring

saavi services for the blind

Our Mission

Saavi Services for the Blind cultivates growth and opportunity for blind people through nonvisual skills training; demonstrating that all challenges have solutions, while fostering self-efficacy through empowerment and confidence.

At a Glance

- **Two NBPCB-certified** Structured Discovery training centers in Tucson and Phoenix
- **Forty-plus years** serving blind and low vision Arizonans
- **Blind and sighted staff** working as colleagues at every level of the organization
- **Outcomes-focused** training adults for competitive integrated employment and independent living. Children and Youth Services focused on independence and skill development. Older Blind Program aimed at equipping seniors with the tools to remain independent.

Foundational

Most Disabilities Are Not Visible

1 in 4 U.S. Adults (over 60 million people) live with a disability - CDC

Invisible Disabilities Defined

Many disabilities like mental health, chronic illnesses, and neurological differences are not outwardly visible to others.

Applying ADA Principles Equally

ADA principles focus on job performance and reasonable accommodations regardless of disability visibility.

Challenges in Workplace Support

Employees often delay requests for accommodations due to stigma or fear of disbelief about invisible conditions.

Creating Inclusive Work Culture

Normalizing invisible disabilities leads to early intervention and a supportive, bias-free workplace.

THE BUSINESS CASE

Accessibility Is a Business Strategy

1 in 4

U.S. adults

live with a disability.
Your largest underserved talent pool

50–200%

of annual salary

is the typical cost to replace a single departing employee

61%

of accommodations

cost the employer nothing at all (Job Accommodation Network data)

Accessibility is a workforce strategy, a risk-reduction strategy, and a brand strategy — all at once.

THE PRINCIPLE

When You Design for the Marginalized, You Serve Everyone

Universal Design

Features built to remove a barrier for one group routinely become indispensable for everyone.

Curb cuts

Built for: wheelchair users

Used by: parents with strollers, delivery workers with carts, travelers with rolling luggage, cyclists, anyone with a temporary injury

Closed captions

Built for: deaf and hard of hearing viewers

Used by: anyone in a noisy gym, a quiet office, a non-native speaker learning English, a parent with a sleeping child, anyone watching with sound off

Accessible documents

Built for: screen reader users

Used by: anyone searching, copying, translating, or zooming text on a small screen and anyone whose eyes are tired at 4pm on a Friday

JOANNE'S STORY

When Accommodation Builds a Career

1

The injury

A concussion and traumatic brain injury that put me on disability and made me uncertain whether I could return to professional work at all.

2

Quality work, matched to capacity

Saavi did not let me drift. They identified meaningful work I could do as I recovered — work that mattered to the organization, not 'busy work' to keep me on payroll.

3

Part-time return

I came back part time, scaled my hours as my recovery allowed, and rebuilt my professional identity inside an organization that already trusted me.

4

Where I am today

Chief People Officer. The same organization that accommodated me during recovery now relies on me to lead its people strategy.

This is an example of how ADA-aligned flexibility directly supports retention!

UNIVERSAL DESIGN AS EMPLOYER

Examples of Inclusive Workplace Practices

We do not band aid with an accommodation. We build it in. Here are the practices that cost little or nothing and reduce turnover.

Flex Holiday Policy

Employees shift observance to align with faith, culture, or family

Family-Friendly Workplace

Caregiver flexibility, chosen-family bereavement, real lactation support

Continuous Training

Tarik leads ongoing development, not just onboarding

Mission Alignment

Every staff member trains in our philosophy and approach

Asset-Based Employment

Hire for strengths, cross-train, swap duties to match aptitude

Professional Development

Career conversations, conferences, tuition support, internal promotion

PRACTICE 1

Flex Holiday Policy

The principle

Standard federal holiday hours, but employees can shift observance to align with their faith, culture, or family rhythm.

Why it matters

- Honors religious diversity without forcing employees to choose between work and observance
- Costs the same number of paid hours we were already budgeting
- Returns trust, retention, and engagement — measurable in our exit interview data

Real examples from our staff

Staff observing Eid — Shift one day from a federal holiday to align with the religious calendar

Staff observing Diwali — Use flex hours to celebrate with family on the actual day

Staff observing Indigenous days — Apply flex hours to days of cultural significance

Staff with split-faith families — Distribute flex hours across observances that matter to them

PRACTICE 2

Family-Friendly Workplace



Caregiving and work are not opposites. We treat them as integrated.

- **Schedule flexibility for caregivers**
  Of children, of aging parents, of partners with chronic illness
- **Sick time that works**
  No requirement to use vacation when you or your child is ill
- **Real lactation support**
  Private space, protected time, freezer access — beyond legal minimum
- **Recognition of routine caregiving demands**
  Doctor visits, school pickups, eldercare appointments
- **Bereavement that recognizes chosen family**
  Not just legally-defined relatives; community matters too
- **Manager training on these policies**
  So they are applied consistently, not at supervisor discretion

Result: lower turnover among the experienced employees in caregiving life stages — exactly the people you can least afford to lose.

PRACTICE 3

Training Beyond Onboarding



Onboarding is the start, not the end, of staff development.

HIRE TO 90 DAYS

Immersion

New staff complete portions of our student curriculum so they can speak from experience, not theory

QUARTERLY

Cohort training

All staff refresh on philosophy, accessibility, technology, and program updates

ONGOING

Cross-training

Staff learn adjacent roles so coverage is never one person deep

ANNUAL

Individual development

Each employee builds a development plan tied to their career, not just their current job

PRACTICE 4

Mission Alignment Training



Every staff member completes mission training — the janitor, the IT lead, the program director, all share one framework.

Why it matters

- Students get a consistent message at every touchpoint — from the front desk to the cafeteria to the classroom
- Mixed signals confuse students and undermine outcomes; aligned signals reinforce them
- Staff feel connected to mission rather than performing a task in isolation — which is one of the strongest retention drivers in workforce research
- For non-mission-driven employers, the equivalent is customer-experience training: even a few days of structured 'walk in their shoes' work pays off in service quality

Translation for your workplace: cross-functional empathy training. The IT person spends a day in customer service. The salesperson spends a day in operations. Everyone understands the whole.

PRACTICE 5

Asset-Based Employment



We hire what people bring, not just to fill seats. Then we cross-train and swap duties so people do what they are good at.

Our principles

- Treat employees as long-term assets to develop, not seats to fill
- Identify and grow transferable skills as careers evolve
- Cross-train so multiple staff can cover key functions
- Swap duties when one person's strength is another's struggle

In practice

- An instructor who excels at curriculum design takes on more course development work, while another instructor takes on more direct teaching
- An employee whose role is changing finds a new role inside Saavi rather than being managed out
- When someone is on leave, three other staff can step in because they have been cross-trained — coverage is never single-threaded

PRACTICE 6

Professional Development at Saavi

Career conversations are separate from performance reviews — and we treat them as just as important.

Individual development plans

Tied to where the employee wants to go, not just their current role description

Conference attendance

Funded for relevant staff — National Federation of the Blind events, professional certifications, peer learning

Tuition support

For credentials and degrees that align with career trajectory and organizational need

Internal promotion preferred

We post internally first; we promote from within whenever capability matches need

PRACTICE 7

Saavi's Three-Stage Onboarding

01

Screening Interview

- Mutual fit and mission alignment
- Conversation more than checklist
- Both sides decide whether to continue

02

Full Interview

- Skills, scenarios, and team meeting
- Candidate meets the people they would work with
- Real work samples, not abstract questions

03

Three-Month Immersion

- New hire completes portions of student curriculum
- Learning shades, screen reader, cane, Braille intro
- Builds lived familiarity with the people we serve

For non-mission-driven employers: even one structured week of 'walk in your customer's shoes' training pays off in service quality and retention.

OPEN THE DOOR WIDER

Inclusive Hiring: Job Descriptions

Three of the most common job-description mistakes — and how to fix them.

AVOID

Must have valid driver's license

Excludes blind, low vision, and many other candidates from roles where driving is not actually essential

USE INSTEAD

Valid government-issued ID required for all positions. For roles where driving is an essential job function, a valid driver's license and clean driving record are required.

AVOID

Must lift fifty pounds

Often boilerplate copied from another posting — was anyone in this role last quarter actually lifting fifty pounds?

USE INSTEAD

List only the physical demands the role actually requires. If lifting really is essential, specify how often: 'occasional lifting up to twenty-five pounds.'

AVOID

Must be able to read printed documents

Implies print and only print, excluding screen reader users and many others

USE INSTEAD

Must be able to access and process written information using preferred tools, including assistive technology.

If a requirement is not actually essential to the job, it is not a requirement. It is a barrier.

WHAT GOOD PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE

Inclusive Hiring: The Interview

DO

- Offer accessible application formats; web forms preferred over PDF
- Ask all candidates: 'Do you need any accommodations for the interview?'
- Send the interview agenda and questions in advance — helps everyone, especially neurodivergent candidates
- Focus on the work and the candidate's approach to it
- If the role involves a visual task, ask 'how would you approach this?' rather than 'can you do this?'
- Treat the candidate's blindness or disability as ordinary, not as the topic

AVOID

- Send only an inaccessible PDF application
- Wait for the candidate to disclose a need without inviting it
- Spring case studies or 'whiteboard' tasks without warning
- Talk about the candidate's disability before talking about the work
- Assume what they can or cannot do — ask, or invite them to demonstrate
- Lower expectations or change the role substantively because the candidate is blind

PRACTICE 1

How To Navigate Accommodations

Recognize Accommodation Requests
Managers must identify informal accommodation requests without requiring legal language or diagnosis disclosures.

Respond Promptly and Respectfully
Timely and respectful responses prevent complaints; delays and dismissive attitudes cause issues.

Engage in Interactive Process
Managers and employees must have ongoing, good-faith dialogue about accommodation needs.

Maintain Confidentiality
Medical information must remain private, shared only on a strict need-to-know basis.

Prevent Retaliation
Any negative actions after accommodation requests can be perceived as retaliation and are prohibited.

What the Interactive Process Looks Like

Employee Raises Need
The interactive process begins when an employee raises a need formally or informally, signaling the start of accommodations

Open Discussion
Managers engage in job-focused discussion to understand barriers and explore possible solutions without delving into medical details

Try Reasonable Solutions
Implement simple low-cost accommodations promptly to support the employee's work effectively without delay.

Make Adjustments
If initial accommodations don't work, continue the conversation to adapt solutions based on feedback and evolving needs.

WHERE IT BREAKS DOWN

Three Common Failure Modes

✕ The scanned PDF

WHAT HAPPENS

A flyer is created, printed, then scanned back in. The 'PDF' is now a picture of text.

THE COST

Nobody can search it, copy from it, translate it, or zoom without pixelation. Screen readers cannot read it at all.

✕ The image-only email signature

WHAT HAPPENS

Logo, contact info, and social icons embedded as a single graphic.

THE COST

Screen readers announce 'image.' Mobile clients block it as a tracking pixel. Recipients cannot tap your phone number to dial.

✕ The print-and-scan-back form

WHAT HAPPENS

Employees download a PDF, print it, fill it by hand, scan it, and email it back.

THE COST

Excludes screen reader users entirely. Adds HR data-entry burden. Creates handwriting errors. Slows the whole process.

None of these problems are about disability. They are about workflow design.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

The Fix: Keep It Born Digital

Scanned PDFs	Export PDFs directly from Word, Google Docs, or Canva. The text stays as text — searchable, copyable, screen-reader-readable.
Image-only signatures	Build your signature with real text. Add a small logo image with alt text. Make links real links. Plain works better than fancy.
Print-and-scan forms	Use Microsoft Forms, Google Forms, Jotform, or a fillable PDF. Data flows directly to your systems with zero retyping. Also helps an office go paperless and saves the environment!
Photo of a flyer in email	Send the flyer as accessible HTML or PDF, with the key information also in the email body as plain text.
Color-only meaning	Pair color with text labels, icons, or bold weight. Instead of 'items in red are urgent,' write 'urgent' alongside the red highlight.

PRACTICAL TIPS, PART 1

Accessible Documents: Five Foundations

1. **Use real text, never images of text** Type words. Do not screenshot them. Do not put text inside a graphic. Do not export as image-PDF.

2. **Use built-in heading styles** Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3 — actual styles, not just bigger bold font. Screen readers, tables of contents, and document outlines all rely on the underlying structure.

3. **Add alt text to meaningful images** Describe what matters about the image. Mark purely decorative images as decorative so they are skipped.

4. **Use real lists** Bulleted and numbered list features in Word, Google Docs, and most tools. Hand-typed dashes and numbers are not lists to a screen reader.

5. **Pair color with text or icon** Never use color alone to convey meaning. Color contrast must meet WCAG AA: 4.5:1 for body text.

PRACTICAL TIPS, PART 2

Accessible Documents: Five More

6 **Use proper table headers** Mark the first row as a header row in your table tool. Bold text in the first row is not a header to a screen reader.

7 **Write meaningful link text** 'Twenty-twenty-six benefits guide' tells the user where they will land. 'Click here' tells them nothing.

8 **Set the document language** Word and Google Docs both have a language setting. Screen readers use this for correct pronunciation.

9 **Run the built-in Accessibility Checker** Word, Acrobat, and Google Docs all have one. It catches the common issues in seconds.

10 **Save born-digital PDFs** Export from Word or Google Docs directly to PDF. Never scan a printed document if a digital version exists.

BEYOND THE DOCUMENT

Accessible Forms



Forms are where accessibility most often fails — and where the productivity gain from getting it right is largest.

Tools that get accessibility right out of the box

Microsoft Forms · Google Forms · Jotform (with accessibility settings on) · Typeform (with care) · Cognito Forms · Formstack · Most modern HRIS form builders

Five rules for accessible forms

- Every field needs a programmatic label, not just visible text near it
- Required fields must be programmatically required, not just marked with an asterisk
- Error messages must announce themselves to assistive technology, not just appear in red
- Group related fields (like 'date' or 'address') with a fieldset and legend
- Test with keyboard only — no mouse — before publishing. If you can complete it without touching the mouse, screen reader users probably can too

WHERE TO START

Accessible Websites: Quick Wins



Six things you can do this month — most before lunch.

Add alt text to images on your careers page
Especially the photos showing 'a day in the life' — describe what is happening

Run a free WAVE or axe scan
WAVE: wave.webaim.org. axe: deque.com. Both flag the most common issues for free.

Ask your ATS vendor for their VPAT
Voluntary Product Accessibility Template — accessibility conformance report. Reputable vendors have one.

Caption your recruitment videos
YouTube auto-captions are a starting point but require human review for accuracy

Test your job posting workflow with keyboard only
If you cannot apply without a mouse, neither can your blind candidates

Audit your application portal
If your application portal fails accessibility, you are losing candidates you never knew applied

STOCK THE TOOLKIT

Free and Low-Cost Tools for Inclusion

NVDA

Free Windows screen reader. Download at nvaccess.org

VoiceOver

Built into every Mac, iPhone, and iPad. Already on devices you own.

TalkBack

Built into Android. Already on devices you own.

Seeing AI

Free Microsoft app. Reads text, identifies products, describes scenes.

Be My Eyes

Free app connecting blind users to volunteer assistance and AI vision.

JAWS

Industry-standard Windows screen reader. Paid; many employers cover for staff.

Bump dots

Tactile labels for appliances and equipment. Under ten dollars per pack.

Task lighting

LED desk lamps with adjustable color temperature. Helps low vision and aging eyes.

WAVE / axe

Free browser extensions for testing web accessibility.

HOW SAAVI CAN HELP

We Are a Resource: At No Cost to You

Job site assessments
We come to your workplace and assess the environment, technology, and workflow for current or prospective blind and low vision employees

Connection to qualified candidates
Our graduates are trained for competitive integrated employment. We can match candidates to your open roles.

Technology consultation
What your blind employee will need on day one. What the realistic budget looks like. What the state vocational rehabilitation system will fund.

Staff training on working alongside blind colleagues
How to introduce yourself, how to give directions, how to handle the everyday situations everyone wonders about

Customer service training
How to serve blind customers with confidence — from retail to healthcare to banking to government

Ongoing partnership
Once you are working with a Saavi-trained employee, we are available for follow-up support

All of this is free to your organization. Reach out and we will start with a conversation.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Seeing AI

A free Microsoft app for iOS and Android. Spend five minutes with it and your sense of what is possible will change.

Try these:

- Point at a document or business card — hear it read aloud
- Point at a barcode — hear product information including ingredients and warnings
- Point at a scene — hear it described
- Point at a person — hear estimated age, emotion, and a short description
- Point at currency — hear the denomination
- Point at a light source — hear whether it is on or off

Scan with your phone

TAKE IT HOME

Three Things to Do This Week

1

Run the Accessibility Checker

On the next document you create. Word, Acrobat, and Google Docs all have one. It takes thirty seconds and catches the common issues.

2

Audit one job description

Pick one open posting. Strip out unnecessary requirements — driver's licenses, lifting language, print-only assumptions. Save the cleaned version as your template.

3

Download Seeing AI and use it for ten minutes

Try it on real things in your life. Bring what you learn back to your team. You will lead the next accommodation conversation differently.

STAY IN TOUCH

Resources and Contact

Saavi Services for the Blind

www.saavi.us

Tucson Center

3350 E Grant Rd, Tucson AZ 85716

Phoenix Center

2920 N 7th St, Phoenix AZ 85014

Today's presenters

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Free External Resources

Job Accommodation Network askjan.org
Free confidential consultation on workplace accommodations good resource for HR teams

National Federation of the Blind nfb.org
Advocacy, scholarships, training resources, employer guidance

WebAIM webaim.org
Web accessibility training, the WAVE scan tool, color contrast checker

ADA National Network adata.org
Free guidance on ADA compliance and reasonable accommodation

Microsoft Seeing AI microsoft.com/ai/seeing-ai
The free demonstration app from earlier in this session

Questions and Discussion

What is the first thing you will change when you get back to your office?