

Coming from a background in psychology and human-computer interaction, I was very excited to dive into coursework focused on user-centric design as part of my master's degree. In the first week, a particular fact struck me. 1 in 4 adults in the US has some disability (cite), yet the needs of people with disabilities are not given priority in the design of the physical and digital world. To make sense of this gap, I partook in several courses, projects, and conferences that allowed me to interact with people with disabilities, professionals, and researchers. These passionate conversations and insightful experiences have helped me not only understand what the field of accessibility has accomplished but also question what role I can play in continuing the inspiring work of amplifying the needs and voices of people with disabilities.

For instance, I didn't realize the extreme lack of resources and training for tech teams within the industry until I attended AccessU (a conference where tech professionals, content creators, policymakers, and advocates come together for deep learning in accessible digital design), where several frustrated developers and managers had come to learn from people with disabilities. This absence points to a critical need for practical frameworks to help approaches like 'ability-based design' translate into accessible products. I have held many conversations with leaders like Sharron Rush, Glenda Sims, James Green, and Nandita Gupta, all of whom voiced their concern for such approaches' needs. Similarly, I also think about how interactive technologies (technologies that facilitate a two-way flow of information) can promote access to critical aspects of one's life, like education, food, resources, and elements of well-being, like art, exercise, etc. The situation becomes even more complex when I think about people with disabilities in low-resource communities. How can researchers in the field create practical and feasible frameworks to facilitate such inclusivity? Even more importantly, how can researchers include people with disabilities in these solutions to allow for their critical feedback? How can we utilize the experiences of people with disabilities to create solutions relevant to their context? I went through similar think tanks as part of my education in accessibility, with topics ranging from automotive cars for people with visual impairments, classroom settings for children with cognitive disabilities, travel from one building to another for students with physical disabilities on campus, and a yoga room for people with auditory disabilities. These activities involved critical reflections on how exclusive such environments are for the disability we were studying, and we then had conversations around compound disabilities with these scenarios. Such discussions have broadened my perspective on the field's research and motivated me to engage with people with disabilities to learn more about how I can amplify their voices. I have collected many such examples over the past few years, and each one has left me with a lesson of always challenging my assumptions and biases in a world that was built using them.

The lack of practical solutions and voice of people with disabilities on the table has led me to pursue a Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, where I aim to work towards accessible and inclusive solutions for interactive technologies. I aspire to be around knowledgeable people with whom I can collaborate to develop these thoughts, and I believe this workshop gives me the ideal opportunity to do that. I am also excited to bring more scholars and professionals into this conversation and explore topics that empower people with disabilities. You can learn more about my previous experiences and work through my [LinkedIn profile \(hirajamshed\)](#).