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Accessibility in the Entertainment Industry

By: Brad Schiller



I have been working in the live entertainment field for nearly 40 years and have seen many changes and improvements during that time. Most of these are technology-related, but there are also many important human changes that I find interesting.

I remember when corporate events were called industrials, and most of the crew looked like they had just come off a rock tour from the '80s.

(Think stereotypical long-haired roadie.) Now, crews of all types of shows are much more professional in terms of looks, skills, and attitudes. In addition, working conditions and safety have greatly improved, and we are starting to explore the number of work hours to find a healthy balance.

However, even as the industry has grown, we still have a long way to go in terms of accessibility for all who

are interested in joining in the fun that we call work. Many people have various disabilities (physical or mental) that present challenges when working in our environments and with our equipment.

Imagine working backstage or at the front of house while in a wheelchair or being blind, deaf, or missing a limb. Others may have neurological disorders that lead to anxiety or other reactions related to flashing lights or loud noises. In all these examples and more, accommodations and considerations must be made for individuals who wish to take on the exciting opportunities within our industry.

I am happy to report that conversations are happening, and changes are starting. But it can be difficult to open our stages and technologies for all who desire to work with us.

Meet Kev

Kev Kollmann is an advocate for people with disabilities working in our field. He is currently a third-year graduate lighting design student at Northern Illinois University. Previously, he studied directing and stage management at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. Kev is especially interested in this subject as he was born with spastic diplegic cerebral palsy, which has resulted in his being unable to walk. Instead, he relies on a power wheelchair to get around. In addition, he

has also suffered stress on his hands, which makes it very difficult for him to use them in a normal way.

"I am just like everybody else except I can't walk," Kollmann says. "I am fortunate that my brain is able to operate for the most part just like the 'normal' person's brain would." Upon graduation, he hopes to become a professor of design and to work alongside companies and businesses to create venues, equipment, and technology that make production more accessible for all. "As a part of that, I enjoy getting the opportunity to try new equipment and technologies and seeing how I can implement them not only into my entertainment career but also in other aspects of my life."

Kollmann has found that the traditional methods of lighting design and programming are very difficult due to his physical disability and fine motor skill delays. However, throughout his graduate school experience, he has been able to work with his faculty to create accommodations and find technologies that have helped him with various tasks.

"For example, in our proscenium house, there was no way for me to be able to get to the tech tables as the aisles were on both sides of the audience. It was decided very early on in my time here to rip out a row of seats and put down a floor covering for me to get to the center of the venue. As it has turned out, that new crossway has proven to be very useful for not just me but for able-bodied folks as well and has also been used during some of the performances at the school."

Accommodations are key

Most of our industry understands the challenges presented to individuals and is open to determining and making reasonable accommodations. In addition to modifying seating areas, some are adding ramps and lifts to non-audience areas as well as sensory or relaxation rooms. However,

accommodations can be expensive, especially for a freelancer wishing to work in various venues and environments.

John Piper is a UK lighting professional who also uses a wheelchair. When he discovered the lengths required for venues to accommodate him, he immediately thought of the costs and wondered if it was fair to ask this of every venue that he might work in. In the UK, laws state that employers must make reasonable adjustments. The reasonable aspect of the statute protects employers regarding accommodations that could be out of scope or budget.

Due to the challenges of providing wheelchair access to many venues and areas as a freelancer, Piper decided to refocus his career, dropping freelance work for employment in a television studio. One studio could make reasonable accommodations that he could count on while doing the lighting work he loves. He was able to adjust his goals and skills to support his disability while forging a great career in television.

Kollmann points out that accommodations don't always have to be expensive or complicated, however. "It may cost some money, but it will be worth it in the long run for everyone who works in the space now and in the future. Accommodations are not as expensive as one would imagine. It just takes a little bit of creativity to make it happen. As one of my undergraduate mentors once said, 'We are theatre people, we are creative.' So, the sky very well could be the limit for anybody, regardless of ability. We just have to be willing to say yes and work with the person with a disability so they can be as successful as possible."

Making it happen

Society often makes discussions about an individual's disabilities feel awkward or possibly even offensive. However, these discussions must happen so everyone can have the

opportunity to work in our field. We need to work together and talk openly with people about their conditions and challenges.

Kollmann notes the difference between treating people equally versus equitably. "I often explain equality and equitability as putting three people side by side: One person is what the society considers to be a normal person, the next is a human in a wheelchair, and the next is an individual who appears normal, but is neurodivergent. If we were to make an accommodation for the individual in a wheelchair, that accommodation may not be what the neurodivergent individual needs. For example, putting a wheelchair user closer to the front of a stage for a rock concert might be the better viewing place for them; however, if you put a neurodivergent individual who is very sensitive to sounds and light at the front of the stage, they could have a panic attack, meltdown, or worse. So being able to think about and discuss each disability on its own is what will help us to create a more equal-opportunity industry."

Currently, the biggest challenge for people with disabilities getting work is the lack of opportunity in the first place. We all need to discuss how we can make our industry more accessible, regardless of personal challenges. Bring the discussion to the table and include the people you wish to accommodate. Don't be afraid to ask the person with the disability what they need, as they know what they require better than anybody else. Most importantly, honor the desire to help with more than just words. Take action, and follow through with actual accommodations and improvements.

Learn more about Kev Kollmann at https://youtu.be/-TaYQv7WUow?si=unS3nFt_OSGf6lS_ 