AI AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES FOR INCLUSION

EPR Annual Conference 2024

18 - 19 June, 2024
Málaga, Spain

REPORT

DAY ONE

INTRODUCTION

Peter Woodward, founding Director of Quest Associates and moderator of the event, kicked off the EPR Annual Conference 2024, welcoming the participants on behalf of EPR and its hosting members (ONCE Foundation especially and: INTRAS Foundation, Ramón Rey Ardid Foundation and Aura Fundacion, and introducing the program. Patrick Ruppol, EPR Chairperson, and Alicia Gómez Campos, EPR Secretary General, welcomed participants and introduced the topic of the conference by highlighting the timely subject.

Francisco de la Torre, Mayor of Malaga, extended a warm welcome to all the participants. He stressed that the city of Malaga is firmly committed to the artificial intelligence and augmentative reality to build a more inclusive society.

KEY NOTE SPEECH

Setting the scene: Taking a closer look into the world of AI

David Timis
Generation

The keynote speaker of the EPR Annual Conference 2024 was David Timis, Global Communications & Public Affairs Manager at Generation, a leading global employment program. With a passion for preparing individuals for the future of work, his expertise lies in reskilling employment, and technology. He has been recognized as an Influential Leader by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, featured on the Forbes 30 Under 30 List for his efforts in equipping young people with digital skills, and invited by the World Economic Forum to participate in the Davos Lab. **David Timis addressed the audience on the implications of AI for employment and skills, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges presented by this technology.** Timis explained that while AI is expected to bring about another industrial revolution by automating and augmenting tasks, the scale and speed of this change are unprecedented, as evidenced by the rapid adoption of technologies like ChatGPT. He underscored the historical context of technological disruptions and emphasized that AI's impact on jobs, especially those in mundane and repetitive sectors, is significant but not entirely negative. The critical issue is whether displaced workers will find meaningful employment or risk becoming part of a "useless class" due to skill mismatches.

David Timis presented data showing the dramatic increase in automation, using Amazon's fulfilment centres as a case study, where robots outnumber human employees. He discussed the broader economic implications, predicting that **millions of jobs in Europe will be transformed by AI by the end of the decade**. He stressed the importance of skills over mere employment, pointing out that 70% of workers will need to upskill or reskill, particularly in tech and green economies. Timis highlighted the essential skills for future jobs, including creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication, alongside digital proficiency and behavioural adaptability. **He concluded by warning that without significant investment in people, not just technology, society could face a shortage of skilled workers. He emphasized that new jobs created by AI must be desirable and meaningful, advocating for the thoughtful implementation of AI tools in collaboration with the workforce to ensure positive outcomes.**

His parting words: AI itself won't replace humans in the workplace, but humans who effectively utilize AI tools will likely secure better opportunities. David Timis's vision for the future lies in the potential of humans working alongside AI tools rather than against them.

PANEL 1:
What's new? Exploring AI & technologies for inclusion

Moderated by
Chloe Touzet

The first panel session of the conference, moderated by Chloe Touzet, Independent Policy Analyst, focused on the intersection of technology, specifically artificial intelligence (AI), and inclusion. The Panel emphasized the dual nature of technology: its potential to enable inclusion through innovations like text messaging for the deaf and screen readers for the visually impaired, and its capacity to create barriers if not designed inclusively from the start. During the session, the expert speakers explored whether AI could offer more promise for inclusion than previous technologies and how mainstream AI might address the needs of people with disabilities.

Almudena Alcaide, Director of Research, Development, and Innovation at Fundacion ONCE, asserted that AI holds significant potential to break down barriers for people with disabilities. She highlighted several AI applications her organization is working on:

Image and Video Processing: AI aids blind individuals by providing environmental context through audio descriptions of pictures and graphs.

Text, Voice, and Language Processing: AI creates subtitles and transcribes speech to text or sign language, aiding deaf individuals.

Simplified Communication: For those with cognitive disabilities, AI simplifies language and transforms speech-to-text or text-to-speech in a user-friendly manner.

Navigation and Guidance: AI-powered guiding robots assist individuals with physical disabilities in navigating large and complex environments like airports.

Incident Detection and Anticipation: AI can provide real-time alerts for potential incidents, helping people with disabilities plan and react more effectively.

Beatriz Barros, Professor of Computer Science and AI, highlighted the significant strides made in communication technology, particularly with AI models adapted for special needs. She emphasized:

- **Adaptation and Personalization**: Leveraging existing AI models and adapting them for various needs can yield substantial benefits without extensive retraining.
- **Integration of Biotechnologies:** Combining micro, nano, and biotechnologies with AI could lead to innovative, small-scale solutions, such as implants that enhance accessibility.
- **Education and Curriculum Development:** Integrating AI into educational frameworks is crucial for preparing future generations to use and develop inclusive technologies.

Christopher Patnoe, Head of Accessibility and Disability Inclusion at Google, discussed the ongoing evolution of AI in technology:

Historical Context: AI's use in accessibility is not new; for instance, Google's automatic captioning on YouTube started in 2009.

Current AI Applications: Tools like suggested alt text in Google Chrome and features on Pixel phones, such as guided frame for taking selfies, are current examples of AI enhancing accessibility.

Awareness and Accessibility: One of the biggest challenges is making people aware of these tools. Additionally, inclusive design must be prioritized in developing AI systems, such as HR software, to avoid inadvertently excluding people with disabilities.

Miguel Ángel Ruíz, Head of Brand Strategy and Innovation at Samsung Spain, outlined Samsung's approach to integrating AI for inclusivity:

Built-in Accessibility Features: Samsung devices incorporate features like "Call Text," which translates voice calls into text for deaf users.

Tailor-Made Local Solutions: Collaborations with organizations like Fundacion ONCE have led to the development of specific applications, such as Impulse for people with aphasia and Anthea for those with hyperacusis.

Inclusive Design and Development: Samsung's partnership with universities and organizations aims to train people with disabilities in programming and designing AI, ensuring that diverse perspectives are included in the creation process.

The panellists identified several challenges in maximizing AI's potential for inclusion:

Awareness and Discoverability: Ensuring that users are aware of existing AI tools and features is crucial for their effective use.

- **Inclusive Design:** AI systems must be designed with input from people with disabilities to avoid exclusionary practices.
- **Connectivity and Accessibility:** Solutions need to work without constant internet connectivity to be universally accessible.
- **Global Democratization:** Technologies developed in well-connected regions need to be made available and functional in less connected parts of the world.
- **Research and Commercialization:** Moving from research prototypes to widely available products is a significant hurdle for academic and nonprofit organizations.

Almudena Alcaide acknowledged that people with disabilities are early adopters of technology but underscored the need for awareness about data security and privacy. She stressed the importance of maintaining high-security standards without compromising accessibility. **Almudena Alcaide called for special care in AI to protect sensitive data, prevent profiling, and ensure that AI doesn't stigmatize individuals.**

Christopher Patnoe emphasized the idea that AI should progress at the speed of trust without stifling innovation. He suggested that **transparency in handling data** and creating algorithms could address many concerns. He highlighted the need for a **collaboration between legislators and technology companies, as legislators often lack technical knowledge.** He pointed out that while large companies like Google take these issues seriously, smaller startups might inadvertently introduce biases due to a lack of awareness.

Chloe Touzet highlighted the need of **bringing together different actors to start meaningful conversations and amplify the message of inclusive AI.**

Beatriz Barros pointed to the dilemma of ethical AI, stressing that while regulations in Europe aim to protect people, differing norms in other regions like China and the United States could lead to inconsistencies. She stressed the **need for global cooperation and warned that stringent regulations might stifle creativity and growth in public research.**

Chloe Touzet's closing question was to name one priority for the next years to move towards inclusive AI. Almudena proposed creating algorithms that generate respectful content towards people with disabilities. Christopher Patnoe expressed a wish to help everyone understand the negative impact of not being inclusive, fostering awareness without fear. Beatriz Barros suggested improving the semantics and reasoning capabilities of text-generating AI for better, more respectful content. Miguel Angel Ruiz envisioned a forum or partnership for closer collaboration among stakeholders to tackle these issues together.

PANEL 2:
Ethics in the age of AI: Moving beyond bias and discrimination

Panel 2 was designed to explore the ethical dimensions of AI, focusing on how to overcome challenges related to bias, discrimination and privacy, and on seizing the opportunities offered by this powerful tool to foster inclusivity and innovation. The session aimed to inspire pragmatic solutions and collaborative efforts to ensure that no one is left behind in the digital transition, learning from the national experience of Spain, the European level and accounting for the voices and needs of a person.

Inmaculada Placencia, Senior Expert in Disability and Inclusion at Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion at the European Commission, provided a European perspective, remarking the importance of safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities within AI frameworks. She detailed how the European legislation has been crafted with extensive consultations to ensure it addresses fundamental rights concerns. Placencia pointed out that while AI holds tremendous potential for enhancing the lives of persons with disabilities by improving communication, access to information, and more, it also poses unique risks.

These include potential biases in data and algorithms, and the necessity for accessible user interfaces. **She advocated for a nuanced approach that differentiates risks for persons with disabilities, noting that AI applications must be carefully designed to avoid discrimination and to enhance usability and inclusion.**

Inmaculada Placencia highlighted the importance of implementing the principles set out by the AI legislation, particularly those related to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. She noted the need EU member states to establish safeguards to minimize risks, ensure market innovations respect human rights, and maintain transparency. She also pointed out the **necessity of collaboration among end users, the private sector, policymakers, and regulators to address ethical challenges in AI. She called for sustained participation of persons with disabilities in standard-setting processes and urged ongoing efforts to ensure collaboration is effective and inclusive.**

Idoia Salazar, founder and president of the Observatory for the Social and Ethical Impact of Artificial Intelligence (OdiseIA), emphasized the historical context of AI ethics, noting that while AI itself is not new, its rapid democratization, especially post-ChatGPT, necessitates a continuous

and dynamic approach to ethical considerations. Salazar stressed the importance of transparent data use and the implementation of ethical principles in AI legislation, particularly through her work with the Spanish government and the European Union. She highlighted initiatives such as the European AI Act and **Spain's regulatory sandbox**, which aim to ensure that AI systems are transparent, data-conscious, and prioritize human oversight**.**

Idoia Salazar stressed the difficulty of creating universal ethical principles for AI, advocating instead for personalized approaches tailored to specific vulnerable groups. She emphasized the **need for practical education about AI's impact** and the importance of spreading awareness of digital rights in accessible language. Although there is a general willingness to collaborate among different stakeholders, actual implementation of ethical AI practices requires continuous effort and effective communication. She highlighted the importance of making theoretical ethical principles actionable and ensuring that all societal groups are informed and involved in AI development processes.

Both Inmaculada Placencia and Idoia Salazar agreed on the importance of **involving persons with disabilities in the testing and feedback stages of AI implementation**. This involvement is crucial to ensure that the legislation and technology protect their concerns effectively. They also stressed the necessity of public funding to support advocacy organizations, which play a vital role in ensuring the voices of people with disabilities are heard and considered in all relevant processes.

Maureen Piggott, member of European Disability Forum's Executive Committee and former President of Inclusion Europe, emphasized the significant efforts behind creating the AI Act and related accessibility legislations, highlighting their importance in ensuring equality and non-discrimination for people with disabilities. She pointed out that it is crucial for these **laws to be widely understood, enforced, and backed by penalties for non-compliance.** Maureen Piggott stressed the need for active involvement of people with disabilities and their representative organizations in the development and implementation of these laws, as well as in technology development teams and data sets used for AI algorithms to prevent bias. She also raised concerns about the premature release of untested technologies, potentially using disabled individuals as test subjects, and called for a focus on the ethical use of AI in various applications, such as employment and education.

Pilar Villarino, Executive Director of the Spanish Committee of Representatives of Persons with Disabilities - CERMI, presented CERMI's methodology for auditing AI to measure its negative impacts on persons with disabilities and ensure that AI systems operate transparently, fairly, and accountably. She introduced an analysis guide for inclusive algorithms that considers both technical functionality and social-economic impacts, emphasizing inclusivity and universal accessibility. Pilar Villarino highlighted ethical principles for AI systems, including inclusion, non-discrimination, and transparency.

She stressed the importance of a **proactive approach to ensure AI respects human rights.** Pilar Villarino also emphasized the need for collaboration among public administrations, businesses, and NGOs, and advocated for public education on digital rights and the impact of AI technologies.

Workshops: summary and key take aways

EPR Annual Conference had three workshops were participants discussed in smaller groups on specific topics and listened to the expertise of speakers on the matter.

WORKSHOP 1:

When does a patient become a person? Moving towards a technology-enabled and community-based continuity of supporting services.

The first workshop was led by EPR Member Fondazione Don Gnocchi - **Furio Gramatica**, Director of Development & Innovation and **Giada Venier,** Policy officer at the Department of Development & Innovation – in collaboration with **Malcom MacLachlan**, Professor of Psychology and Social Inclusion, and Co-director of the ALL (Assisting Living & Learning) Institute at Maynooth University, and Honorary Professor in in the Department of Psychiatry & Mental Health, University of Cape Town. They provided insights on how tech and AI-based solutions can help service providers with tools that can follow an individual along the whole pathway of care, from being taken care of as a patient in hospital or homecare settings, to living an autonomous life in the community, as a person. Participants learned about real-life innovative experiences of in-hospital robotic rehabilitation and home telerehabilitation, as well as examples of digital solutions for smart and healthy ageing at home. The workshop was an opportunity to reflect on the challenges posed by regulatory developments at a time of fast technological progress, and on the importance of promoting digital democracy, co-leadership and good governance aligned with the UNCRPD.

Participants reaffirmed person-oriented approaches to be the most favoured in the work of many member organisations in the context of medical, vocational or social rehabilitation. The value basis was deemed equally important. In addition, treatment, care and support should take into account that time i.e. the lifetime perspective is crucial for service users. Ultimately, each person's situation and theirneeds are unique, and should be taken care of accordingly.

WORKSHOP 2:

Improving organisational efficiency with AI for social services providers.

This workshop was an occasion to share good practices from EPR members who already use AI in their daily tasks. **Borja García**, Head of IT in the Corporate Technology and Cybersecurity Department at Fundación ONCE and Inserta, presented InclunIA. This is a bias-free artificial intelligence model designed to optimise the labour intermediation process at Fundación ONCE / Inserta Empleo.

Its main objective is to improve efficiency and equity in the selection processes, facilitating the placement of people with disabilities in the labour market.

Then, **Veronika Kaska** from Astangu Estonia, presented their VRC application, inspiring participants to dare to dream about the potential fields of implementing AI solutions that greatly improve efficiency.

Finally, **Timo Heiskala**, the CEO of Autism Foundation Finland, explained how they have been using AI in shift planning. It has enabled a new way to organise the workflow of over 500 people which is greatly time-saving and increases employee satisfaction.

WORKSHOP 3:

AI & new tech: inspiring practices from across Europe.

In this Workshop three innovative projects on cutting-edge technologies that successfully integrate technology and AI to support the rehabilitation and social inclusion of people with disabilities were presented. The speakers shared practical hands on experience on how smart mirrors, smart glasses and an employment matchmaking application are using AI to make impactful outcomes for people with disabilities were presented. The speakers shared practical hands on experience on how smart mirrors, smart glasses and an employment matchmaking application are using AI to make impactful outcomes for people with disabilities in their day to day lives and for their rehabilitation.

Bhagya Goonewardhane, Head of Business Development at Envision Technologies - a Netherlands-based company – spoke about their Envision Glasses: smart glasses that utilise AI to assist users who are blind or have low-vision in reading text, describing surroundings, recognizing faces of loved ones, and making live video-calls for sighted assistance. Through their technology, Envision aims to enhance the independence and everyday experiences of people who are blind and low-vision by providing practical and accessible tools for everyday life.

Voices from the frontline: Service users on technology in their lives

In this session of the Conference, the perspective of service users was presented to gather a more comprehensive picture of the impact of AI systems and new technologies in their lives. Modes of delivering care and assistance for people with disabilities are rapidly changing – where technology plays a more and more important role in, supporting educators and teachers, assisting therapists and carers, organising the work and the workers etc. Thus, EPR asked its members: What about the service users? What about the learners, the students, the participants, the patients and the clients? How does technology change their lives and the ways they can access support and care? How does it change their way of living, learning and working? Are they excited about taking up the new tech? Or concerned? And what do we learn from service users about the use of technology? Four EPR member organisations contributed to a video that aimed to answer these questions by reporting testimonies from the service users. The video was shown to the audience and then a representative from each organisation shared their experiences:

Nektaria Sifaki, Theotokos Foundation: At Theotokos, service users faced significant risks of online exploitation. In response, Theotokos collaborated with the cyber security ministry to design a training program tailored specifically to their service users' needs. This program was developed in easy-to-understand language to empower participants with the knowledge and skills needed to safely navigate and use technology, protecting them from potential harm.

Sara Marcos, Fundación INTRAS: INTRAS observed that many of its service users experienced discomfort with new technologies, perceiving them as a form of external control. This sense of surveillance was particularly noted in contexts like smart home settings. INTRAS emphasized the importance of offering service users a variety of technological options, allowing them to choose tools that best suit their preferences and promote a sense of autonomy.

Rebecca Leon Gracia, Fundación Rey Ardid: FRRA reported challenges related to economic barriers, particularly the digital divide affecting their service users. Many users do not have access to personal computers at home or lack an internet connection, limiting their ability to engage with digital resources. This economic obstacle hinders access to online services and opportunities, widening existing inequalities.

Giada Venier, Fondazione Don Gnocchi: At FDG telerehabilitation presented a unique challenge in preserving human connections. While users appreciated the ability to receive rehabilitation services from the comfort of their own homes, the organization recognized the risk that these individuals might miss out on essential interactions with the broader community. The challenge lies in balancing the convenience of at-home rehabilitation with the benefits of engaging with external environments.

Conquering the world: New digital infrastructures to address complex societal challenges

Gorka Espiau Idoiaga, Director at the "Agirre Lehendakaria Center for Social and Political Studies", a University of the Basque Country and Columbia University collaborative research initiative, concluded Day 1. He shared several key concepts centred around scaling up social impact through the incorporation of complexity, the importance of community, and the integration of digital tools in social innovation. He highlighted the evolution of understanding from focusing solely on the patient to considering the broader perspective of the person and, ultimately, the community. This transition reflects the increasing complexity of social challenges and the need for a comprehensive approach that incorporates digital technologies and artificial intelligence to enhance the effectiveness of social work.

Gorka argued that by combining social knowledge with the capabilities offered by digital technologies, particularly AI, organizations could elevate their impact. He pointed out that **many complex social and environmental challenges fail not because of a lack of technology, but due to a poor understanding of the social dynamics that need to be connected to these technologies. He stressed the importance of understanding people and social interactions as being more critical than the technology itself.**

To scale up impact, Gorka introduced the concept of the "**social innovation spiral**," which includes five core capabilities: visualizing complexity, interacting with ecosystems, making sense of information, co-creation, and testing. He emphasized that while organizations may excel in some areas, they often lack the digital environments necessary to multiply their efforts.

He provided examples of how digital tools can be used to visualize complex ecosystems, segment needs, and enhance collaboration among organizations tackling similar challenges.

Gorka also discussed the shift from traditional experimentation to a portfolio approach in social innovation. He explained that unlike the traditional funnel approach, which focuses on developing a single solution, the portfolio approach involves testing multiple interconnected initiatives simultaneously. This method reduces the risk of failure and increases the likelihood of finding successful solutions.

He encouraged organizations to view their work as a portfolio of experiments and to strategically distribute risk across various initiatives.

In closing, he highlighted a tangible example of a social innovation laboratory working on end-of-life care. The laboratory moved from focusing on patients to addressing the needs of individuals and their communities. By creating a portfolio of diverse initiatives, they were able to provide comprehensive care solutions that went beyond technology, incorporating community support and addressing various aspects of end-of-life care. This example draw attention to the importance of a holistic, community-driven approach to social innovation.

DAY TWO

18th – 19th June 2024 | Málaga, Spain

ConverStations

Participants were asked to choose between 10 different tables. Each table had a host presenter who would lead the discussion around a specific topic.

1 AI Act: short survival guide for service providers
Presenter: Giada Venier, Fondazione DonGnocchi

The AI Act is now reality and will be implemented in the next years. Service providers might have some questions about it: does it apply if they want to develop an AI system for research purposes? What are examples of AI tools used in their services that will be classified as high-risk? What about persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups? The ConverStation will not present the whole AI Act, but provide guidance on how to navigate the new law and assess its impact on their work.

2 Transforming Education with AI: From Goals to Action
Presenter: Nektaria Sifaki, Theotokos Foundation

So far, as trainers, we have tried to break down each task into as small steps as possible, in order to make it easier for our trainees to acquire new knowledge to become self-sufficient or to enter the open labour market. By experimenting with AI we saw it as a challenge to explore how each task could be broken down into even more steps. And in addition to this, it would be very helpful in our daily training routine if we could create with the help of AI a bank of activities linked to each small task. This would lead to targeted and key interventions that would make our work more effective. If you are curious to see how AI can help us in this, we are waiting for you at our table.

3 **Pixels to Perspectives: Teaching about Bias in AI through Game-Based Learning**

Presenter: Eimear O'Driscoll and Ronan Fox, National Learning Network REHAB group

National Learning Network (NLN) is the education and training division of Rehab Group, Ireland. NLN's universally designed curriculum, our teaching staff and student supports enable and empower disabled people to gain skills, get qualifications and progress to further education or employment. The ConverStation will cover how NLN uses Minecraft Education's Hour of Code: Generative AI to teach students about artificial intelligence and its inherent biases. Through a case study, we will demonstrate Minecraft as a dynamic tool for introducing complex AI concepts, while critically addressing biases particularly affecting minority groups and individuals with disabilities. This session is designed to share our innovative approaches in teaching and learning and foster discussions on ethical AI in education.

4 **AI in Project Management: Where Are We and What Do We Need?**

Presenter: Roberto Zanon, European Platform for Rehabilitation

Join the discussion, bring your best practices and share your needs. How is AI helping you in the implementation of your projects? And what are the activities you would like it to handle? - Open discussion, contributions from all participants are welcome.

5 **Would € 5 billion fund your Assistive Technology?**

Presenter: Kieran Hanraha, REHAB group

New EU legislation - the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive - active in every country, will transform the landscape for corporate social responsibility and release billions in funding and resources to non-profits and charities every year. The trick? You have to ask corporations for it, and you need to know what they want in return. It might surprise you, let's discuss how together.

6 **'Vivir en Casa': A 15-participant socio-technological pilot study in Malaga on a new model of home care.**

Presenter: Antonio Jerez Cordoncillo, assisted by Marina Soler Almoguera, University of Malaga

Cooperation between the Andalusian Government and the University of Málaga with the goal to change the home care intervention model in Andalusia. Social workers and engineers working side by side in a new user-centered model. Both technologies and social services are applied in order to allow dependent people develop their life projects in their homes. This new model is being already applied within 15 homes in the Teatinos district, Málaga.

7 — CAMPERO : a project to study the acceptance and adaptability of social assistive robots (SAR) in an elderly environment.
Presenter: José Miguel Galeas Merchan, University of Malaga

Socially Assistive Robots need to be aware of their context in order to be useful. Acceptance and usefulness come from adapting the behaviour of the robot to the user and the situation. The robot is able to adapt his behaviour by toggling the execution of use cases and by modifying the execution of each use case according to the context. The architecture is provided with an ontology to facilitate the extension of the robot's functionalities and the description of its behaviour. In order to test the proposed cognitive architecture, a set of use cases has been defined following a participatory design involving residents and caregivers from a retirement home. These use cases are being tested on that environment.

8 — The first robotic assistant for transport and retail
Presenter: Almudena Alcaide and José Antonio Gutiérrez, Fundación ONCE

Fundación ONCE has developed the first robotic assistant for people with disabilities (sensory, physical and cognitive) in environments that may be challenging such as transport infrastructures (transport hubs, airports, train stations...), hospitals, and shopping centres. The robot offers safety and independence to use these facilities on equal terms.

9 — "Ergasia Mou": The first Greek e-platform for job matching for employers and people with intellectual and neurodevelopmental disabilities.
Presenter: Elli Kafritsa, Margarita VTC

"Ergasia Mou" is transforming the job market by connecting people with intellectual and neurodevelopmental disabilities to meaningful employment. Developed through a co-design process involving professionals and individuals with intellectual disabilities, our innovative and easy-to-read platform bridges the gap between employers and job seekers, promoting inclusivity and diversity in the workplace.

10 — Breaking the 80/20 rule: upending AI to value and serve difference
Presenter: Jutta Treviranus, Inclusive Design Research Centre

As a statistical reasoning machine AI favours the typical, popular, predictable, and statistically average. AI propagates discrimination against difference, statistical outliers, and thereby disability. Can we create AI that values the way we are all unique?

PANEL 3:
The impact of AI on Employment

Panel 3 aimed at discovering how to implement transformative AI solutions to facilitate access to the open labour market, given that the disability employment gap has remained stably high during the last decade. Speakers were invited to share stories proving the benefits of employment inclusion for businesses and employers alike, as well as the enabling potential of digital tools for employees with disabilities looking to find or retain work.

Sabina Lobato, Director of Training and Employment, Operations and Studies at Fundacíon ONCE, set the stage by highlighting the rapid development of AI and its potential to improve workplace inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities. She acknowledged the dual nature of AI as both an opportunity and a challenge, emphasizing the need for inclusive and non-discriminatory AI development and addressing the urgency of upskilling and reskilling workers.

Maureen Piggot expressed optimism about AI-enabled workplaces, particularly for young people with digital skills. However, she voiced concern for those with intellectual disabilities who might face job displacement. Maureen Piggot emphasized the need for efforts to make AI assistive for intellectually disabled individuals. She advocated for early education on digital skills, accessible ICT equipment in schools, and continued support through vocational training and internships.

Chloe Touzet highlighted the necessity of taking AI-related risks seriously, particularly biases and privacy concerns. She identified four key risks: errors due to underrepresentation in training data, amplification of existing biases, privacy risks, and inequity of use. She advocated for collective action among stakeholders, including politicians, disability rights organizations, and industry, to mitigate these risks. Stressing the potential of AI to lift barriers for people with disabilities. She outlined four categories of AI solutions: disability-centred solutions, environmental adaptations, meta-level accessibility improvements, and creating new job opportunities.

Stefan Tromel, Senior Disability Specialist at the International Labour Organization, shared a balanced view. He acknowledged that there would be winners and losers in the AI transition, focusing on challenges in developing countries where access to basic skills and technologies is limited. Stefan Tromel discussed good practices in the private sector, particularly from IT companies, and the role of employers in promoting disability inclusion. He highlighted the importance of regulation, such as the EU AI Act, and the need for companies to incorporate AI responsibly.

Q&A HIGHLIGHTS

Stefan Tromel discussed the role of private employers in promoting equal opportunities and the potential of AI to enhance workplace adjustments. He cited positive examples from IT companies like Microsoft and Google, which have seen improvements in employee performance through AI.. Stefan Tromel also touched on the importance of ESG reporting and how disability inclusion should be integrated into corporate governance.

Maureen Piggot called for building capacity within the disability community, starting with early digital literacy education in schools, and extending to workplace training and support. She stressed the need for accessible ICT equipment and assistive devices, as well as proper training for teachers and students.. She also called for state-funded programs to support small and medium-sized enterprises in providing inclusive digital skills training.

The panel concluded with a call to action for stakeholders, including policymakers, disability rights organizations, and industry leaders, to collaborate in harnessing AI's potential while addressing its challenges to promote labour inclusion for people with disabilities.

PANEL 4:

How meaningful stakeholder engagement look like in the context of AI

Kave Noori, AI policy officer at the European Disability Forum, opened the panel with an overview of the EU AI Act. This act classifies AI systems into four risk categories (unacceptable, high, limited, and low) each with different requirements and restrictions.

Bianca Prins, Head of Global Accessibility at Deutsche Bank ING, emphasized how many developers still design **for** persons with disabilities rather than **with** them. She highlighted three key points for meaningful engagement:

- Creation of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) dedicated to the inclusion of persons with disabilities;
- The importance of research on disabilities, overcoming privacy concerns;
- Direct involvement of persons with disabilities in the product development cycle.

Jutta Treviranus, Director of the Inclusive Design Research Centre in Canada, criticized the use of statistical determination in second and third generation AI. This approach makes AI less reliable for persons with disabilities, who are at the edges of statistical distributions. She also stressed the need to rethink our approach to inclusive design, going beyond mere statistical representation.

Then, Kave Noori opened up an interactive discussion on privacy issues. Here, Bianca Prins expressed concern about the traceability of persons with disabilities through assistive technologies, which exposes them to fraud risks. She proposed solutions such as implementing closed systems within organizations to protect sensitive data.

Jutta Treviranus highlighted the limitations of current AI ethics practices, which often do not adequately consider statistical discrimination. She suggested inverting algorithms to promote diverse perspectives and considering protection against data abuse and misuse.

Q&A HIGHLIGHTS

An audience member raised the issue of integrating technological solutions. The rapid pace of mainstream technological development often renders existing assistive technologies obsolete, creating integration challenges. Jutta Treviranus concluded the panel by underscoring the risks of cultural homogenization and the uncritical adoption of AI as a one-size-fits-all solution for eliminating workplace barriers.

Inspirational Speaker: The Inclusive Revolution. New Art Practices for Robust AI Services

Manuel Delgado, Spanish visual artist devoted to accessible and collaborative art as well as PhD candidate in Bioethics applied to Artificial Intelligence at the Comillas Pontifical University (Madrid), delivered the closing speech of the Annual Conference. His was a compelling call to action to all participants, highlighting the transformative power of art and artificial intelligence in creating a more inclusive society. He began by emphasizing that AI is a revolution already in motion, significantly impacting the job market and offering powerful solutions for people with disabilities. However, he pointed out a critical gap: while most mainstream AI tools are developed by industry giants, those tailored for people with disabilities often come from academia and smaller enterprises. This disparity call attention tothe need for collaboration between large industries and academic institutions to ensure AI's benefits reach everyone.

Manuel Delgado then turned his attention to the arts, challenging the notion that art is inherently inclusive. He highlighted the stark reality that people with disabilities are frequently marginalized in cultural spaces, with only a small percentage of European museums fully accessible to them. Through his innovative projects, such as "Painthical" and "Practical Info," Manuel Delgado demonstrated how art could transcend traditional boundaries and foster empathy and collaboration. These projects use sensory experiences, like listening to poetry to visualize paintings, and AI-generated environments with Braille, to make art accessible to all, regardless of their abilities. The audience was invited to partake in a visualisation exercise, whereby Manuel recited one of his visual poems, which demonstrated the importance of sight in deciphering traditional art.

His inspiring message was clear: true inclusion means creating environments where everyone has equal access and opportunity to engage with and benefit from both art and technology. Art can be used to highlight some of the gaps in social inclusion and provide interesting methodologies to be transversally applied to the world of AI.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Alicia Gomez Campos thanked EPR Team and EPR members, ILUNION Hotel and the moderator for their work in putting together the Conference. **Patrick Ruppol** concluded with a forward-looking speech on how EPR will continue to build its AI and AT portfolio and include the important takeaways from all the discussions future planning of activities.

EVALUATION

The evaluation of the Annual Conference was very positive. This feedback was collected in person in Malaga, via an Evaluation Form online, and based on perceptions and takeaways shared by different people on LinkedIn.

71.4% of respondents stated that they felt strongly inspired by the AC and its speakers. "Excellent" was the rating most awarded for all the plenary sessions, in terms of the participants' learning experience and the gain of relevant knowledge and information.