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Allentown

Tom Wlodkowski is working hard to put himself out of a job.

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Wlodkowski is the head of accessibility at Comcast, having joined four years ago from AOL. After working 25 years to make technology more inclusive for people with disabilities, he is aiming for the day when it's just part of the routine. "We'll know we're there when you don't need dedicated accessibility groups anymore," Wlodkowski, who was born blind, said in an interview three weeks ago in his lab at the towering Comcast skyscraper in Philadelphia. "People are starting to realize now that...if you really focus on

accessible design, you make a better product for everyone."

Tools built for accessibility underpin tech essential to your daily life. Whether you lean on the closed captions in your **Facebook** News Feed's videos or the voice-command powers baked into today's phones and speakers, such features help people with disabilities and fix problems for everyone else, too. It's the crux of inclusive design, a concept Wlodkowski and his team at Comcast have promoted inside their own monolithic **media company**: You reach more people when you consider and include all of them, and that makes for stronger business -- and better tech.

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Comcast isn't alone in this trend. Both [Apple and Microsoft kicked off events](#) last week with videos about the importance of designing products to be more inclusive. There was heightened awareness of the issue in October in particular because it was National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

Technology has a track record of breakthroughs aimed at accommodating a disability that ended up helping others. Alexander Graham Bell's work on the telephone went hand-in-hand with research into deafness. The first working typewriter was crafted by Pellegrino Turri so that his lover, who was blind, could return his letters. Vint Cerf, a "father of the Internet" who is hard of hearing, developed early email protocols so he and his wife, who is deaf, could communicate easier. For Wlodkowski, inclusion was baked into his upbringing.

The youngest of four brothers, he jokes that his mother didn't have the bandwidth to coddle him with a houseful of boys wreaking havoc. Wlodkowski jokes about his parents setting him loose on the streets of the Connecticut suburb of Southington. But when the time came for him to ride a bike, his mom found herself fighting back her instinct to protect him, she told him later.

"We were in a schoolyard in our neighborhood, and I fell off like every kid does, but I probably attributed it to the fact I couldn't see," he recounted. When he complained that he wanted to stop, she told him they wouldn't leave until he got back on the bike, even if they stayed in the schoolyard all night. "She said it was the hardest thing for her to stay true because it would have been easy to say, 'You know what, let's just go walk the bike home and we're done,' right?" he said. "But that was probably the best thing she could've done."

Wlodkowski realized early in his career that inclusion meant casting a wide net to the disability community at large, even those with the same disability as himself. He began working in accessibility and tech in the early 1990s at public radio and TV station WGBH in Boston. The company at the time was developing descriptive video services for people who have low vision or are blind; the audio descriptions narrate the action in a show during breaks in dialogue.

"When I first got there, I was like, 'Well, I'm the consumer. Won't you just tell me what's on the screen?'" he said. He failed to grasp the nuances that make video description most helpful, he said. A kids' show, for example, needs to speak relatively, like calling something "as big as a dinner plate" rather than 12-inches around. Grown-up programming descriptions should be neutral, so viewers can draw their own conclusions about why a character is, say, standing silently in the corner.

It taught him a lesson that he has carried through to the present day at Comcast, where his team holds frequent roundtables to get first-hand accounts from people with all kinds of disabilities. "You can put 10 of us in a room who are blind, and I might have one way of doing it, and [another person] might have another," Wlodkowski said. At Comcast, "it's our job to sift through all of that feedback and reach that common denominator that at least gives everybody a good jumping-off point and a usable experience."

Comcast's voice remote is the company's prime example of how an accessible technology makes mass-market products better. The remotes have a voice-command button that lets anyone pull up a program, movie or channel just by asking. Since Comcast introduced them to subscribers of its advanced X1 pay-TV service a year and a half ago, the company has deployed more than 10 million to customers. It's tech that sprung from Wlodkowski's team.

For people with a visual disability like him, that kind of control puts watching television in closer reach. It also allows the people who help care for someone with a disability -- a spouse, a parent, a roommate -- to do something else while their loved ones

command their couch surfing on their own. And for people with sight, it helps liberates them from that design monstrosity dating back to the dawn of cable TV: the channel grid.

"People may think of this as a niche audience, but there is broader value to it," he said. More than one in three US households have a member who identifies as having a disability, according to [panel research by Nielsen this month](#). And a [landmark study by Forrester and Microsoft](#) more than a decade ago found that 60 percent of working-age US adults were likely to benefit from accessible technology, even if they don't necessarily identify as having what's commonly categorized as a disability.

Wlodkowski is starting to see signs that more companies are paying attention. Yes, his job at Comcast is still intact, but he's noticed attendance explode at business conferences centered on accessibility in recent years. The number of attendees at the US Business Leadership Network's annual conference, which focuses on strategies for including people with disabilities in the workplace, spiked 88 percent this year from 2013.

Wlodkowski said his team continues to work on advanced technology, like eye-gaze tracking that can help people who can move only their pupils to pick exactly what they want to watch on TV. But he said their meaningful role is simply helping others at the company realize how little it takes to help so many. "It's not like we're doing rocket science over in this lab," he said. "We're here to connect all the dots." – *CNET*

Voters have three choices if they want to cast a ballot early in Pennsylvania: be out of town on Election Day, be medically incapacitated or lie about one of the first two options.

Absentee balloting is the only way to vote early in the Keystone State, which is one of only 13 without some form of early voting, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. To legally get an absentee ballot in Pennsylvania, you have to be out of town on Election Day or medically incapable of voting.

But many voters stoop to the third choice — fibbing about being out of town, according to state Sen. Lisa Boscola, D-Lehigh. Boscola, who chaired a Senate Democratic Policy Committee hearing Wednesday at the August Wilson Center, Downtown, said voters shouldn't need an excuse to get an absentee ballot. "I know certain people who (vote absentee) every single time, and they just say they're going away," Boscola said. "Now, come on. They're actually kind of lying, or fibbing. Why not just open it up, keep them honest. No excuse."

State Sen. Wayne Fontana, D-Brookline, who requested the hearing, is sponsoring a bill that would permit voting 15 days prior to a primary or general election at select polling places in each county. The polls would have to be open eight hours each weekday and a total of at least eight hours on weekends. Fontana said he purposely called for the hearing six days before a presidential election to highlight the need for early voting in Pennsylvania. So far, 22 million people across the country — including President Obama and former U.S. House Speaker John Boehner — have voted early for Tuesday's election. "The whole point of this is to get more people to vote," Fontana said. "I think it's all about convenience. Our commonwealth is now one of only 13 states that does not only not offer early voting, but we also still require an excuse for absentee ballots."

He blamed Republican majorities in the state House and Senate for holding up election reform. House Republican spokesman Steve Miskin said election reform would require a change in the state Constitution. "People have one year to make a plan for one day. Is that really inconvenient?" Miskin said. "The fact is, on early voting, you need a constitutional change, and constituents have not been hammering the doors down saying, 'We want to start voting in July.' Do you really want to start those

presidential advertisements in July?”

Clifford Bob, chair of Political Science at Duquesne University, said early voting studies indicate it doesn't necessarily increase turnout. “The bottom line in terms of benefit effects, as I see it, is that turnout effects are small,” he said. “Convenience effects are substantial, but they could magnify some of the problems that many complain about politics: partisanship, disproportionate influence of wealthy and educated voters and so forth.”

Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald estimated early voting would cost Allegheny County about \$300,000 per election. He said the state should pick up the tab. “I want to make it as easy and accessible as I can for the voters of Allegheny County,” Fitzgerald said.

Douglas Hill, executive director of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, noted that a big problem is that people would cast ballots before counties certify them. Candidates can be added or removed after votes are cast. “I hate for that to be a detriment,” said Sen. Jay Costa, D-forest Hills. “I recognize the point. It's important to raise it, but at some point you got to say this is it.” – ***Pittsburgh Tribune-Review***



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