2026 Volume: 02 Issue: 01 www.ijrpa.com ISSN 2456-9995 Research Article

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

Page: 01-28

DIGITAL INCLUSION AND REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION: ENABLING PARTICIPATION OF EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES IN CONTEMPORARY WORKPLACES

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Article Received: 05 December 2025
Article Revised: 25 December 2025
Published on: 13 January 2026

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DOI: https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.2840

ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates how emerging digital work environments, together with reasonable accommodation practices, shape the workplace inclusion of employees with disabilities. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach based on secondary literature and empirical studies published between 2022 and 2025, the review highlights both the opportunities and challenges created by digital transformation. Evidence shows that accessible digital infrastructure, user-friendly platforms, and appropriately deployed assistive technologies can substantially reduce participation barriers for employees with diverse impairments. These tools enhance communication, promote flexible task execution, strengthen autonomy, and support greater productivity and job satisfaction. In many organisations, digitalisation has opened space for hybrid and remote work models that allow employees with mobility, sensory, or chronic conditions to engage fully without facing the constraints of traditional office environments. Despite these benefits, the findings also underscore persistent inequities associated with the digital divide. Differences in access to reliable connectivity, appropriate devices, and ongoing digital-skills training continue to disadvantage employees with disabilities, particularly those in resource-constrained settings. Moreover, inaccessible

software interfaces, poorly designed online communication systems, and insufficient organisational support can reinforce exclusion if accommodation policies do not explicitly address digital requirements. The study contends that reasonable accommodation must evolve beyond conventional physical adjustments to include digital, procedural, and organisational elements. This involves investing in inclusive digital design, establishing clear accessibility standards, and building institutional capacity for the adoption and maintenance of assistive technologies. The paper concludes that employers and policymakers have a critical role in strengthening digital inclusion frameworks that support equitable participation. It calls for context-sensitive policies that align with national disability legislation, targeted digital-skills development programmes, and more comprehensive empirical research, especially in regions where digital accessibility remains understudied. By broadening the scope of reasonable accommodation to fully integrate digital considerations, organisations can advance meaningful inclusion and create more resilient and equitable workplaces.

KEYWORDS: Assistive technology; Digital work; Disability inclusion; Reasonable accommodation; Workplace accessibility.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Workplaces around the globe are transforming rapidly as digital technologies become increasingly embedded into core operations. From cloud-based collaboration tools to remote working platforms and AI-powered systems, organisations are rethinking how work is structured, managed, and performed. For employees with disabilities, this digital shift brings a dual-edged promise: it offers new possibilities for inclusion, but also risks of exclusion if accessibility and accommodation are not intentionally addressed. On the opportunity side, digital environments can substantially reduce traditional physical and mobility barriers. By decoupling work from specific physical locations, remote and hybrid work arrangements permit individuals with mobility impairments, chronic health conditions, or other access challenges to participate more fully in professional life. Flexible scheduling, teleconferencing, and asynchronous workflows can accommodate variable energy levels, assistive devices, or medical appointments, enabling higher autonomy and more sustainable engagement (Business & Disability Forum, 2024). Additionally, assistive technologies, such as screen readers, speech recognition, task-management apps, and personalization tools, can enhance communication, productivity, and independent participation in digital workflows (Winiarski, 2024).

However, these benefits are far from automatic. Without deliberate accessibility design and inclusive policy, digital transformation may reproduce or deepen exclusion. Persistent inequities in access to devices and connectivity, often referred to as a "digital divide", disproportionately affect people with disabilities. In South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, for example, research shows that individuals with disabilities experience significantly lower access to technology and digital infrastructure than the general population (Buthelezi, Zondo, Nxumalo, & Vilakazi, 2024). Such disparities limit the potential of digital environments to be truly inclusive. Moreover, many organisations still treat accommodation as primarily a matter of physical infrastructure, ramps, modified workstations, ergonomic furniture, while neglecting the digital and organizational dimensions of accessibility. When policies for reasonable accommodation do not explicitly target software accessibility, flexible remote working, or digital literacy support, employees with disabilities can be left behind in modernising workplaces (British Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2024). The result is a tension: digital work environments hold promise, but only if accommodation practices keep pace.

This paper addresses the complex research problem of how digital work environments, in concert with reasonable accommodation policies, influence the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in the workplace. In particular, it asks:

- ***what are the enabling factors and persistent barriers? And***
- ***how can accommodation practices evolve to fully leverage digital contexts?***

The primary objectives of the study are threefold:

First, it critically examines the most recent empirical evidence (2022–2025) on digital accommodation practices, how organisations provide, implement, and sustain assistive technologies and flexible digital arrangements.

Second, it identifies persistent barriers that hinder inclusion, such as unequal access to digital resources, inaccessible software, lack of skills, or weak organizational policies.

Third, it proposes a conceptual framework for understanding and advancing digital inclusion in employment, one that reconceives reasonable accommodation beyond its traditional physical adaptations to embrace digital and procedural dimensions.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform both employers and policymakers as they design and regulate inclusive workplaces in an evolving digital economy. By highlighting the digital dimension of accommodation, the paper seeks to guide organisations toward inclusive practices that are proactive, rather than reactive; systemic, rather than piecemeal. In doing so, it contributes to discussions on disability rights, labour policy, and

organisational design in an era of rapid technological change. To frame the investigation, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. ***How do digital tools and environments facilitate or hinder the workplace participation of employees with disabilities?***

This question explores both the positive enabling functions of digital technologies (e.g., remote work, assistive software) and the structural or technical barriers that still prevent full participation.

2. ***What forms of reasonable accommodation, beyond traditional physical adaptations, are necessary in digital work contexts?***

This question seeks to identify and articulate a broader, more nuanced conception of accommodation that includes digital infrastructure, flexible work models, accessible design, and capacity-building for both employees and managers.

Moving to address these questions, this paper aims to build a conceptual foundation for more inclusive, equitable, and accessible digital workplaces. Ultimately, it argues that digital transformation must be matched with intentional accommodation redesign, making accessibility a central pillar of future-of-work strategies rather than an afterthought.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review traces three broad themes in current scholarship: (1) the role of assistive and inclusive technologies in enabling employment; (2) the digital divide and inequities faced by persons with disabilities; and (3) the specific challenges and opportunities in developing-country or Global South contexts. It also identifies key gaps in existing research and suggests directions for future investigation.

Assistive and Inclusive Technologies in Employment

Recent research highlights that assistive technologies (AT) have become central to enabling participation of people with disabilities in the modern workplace. A systematic review of technological innovations in employment consistently identifies tools such as screen readers, voice recognition software, accessible user interfaces, alternative input devices, and predictive text as critical in reducing barriers (Md Jani, Siti Nurul Akma Ahmad, Ali & Misba, 2025). These technologies not only support daily task execution, but they also foster autonomy, improve productivity, and strengthen worker satisfaction. In many cases, AT empowers workers with sensory or motor impairments to engage with digital workflows more effectively. For example, screen readers, in combination with properly marked-up web pages or applications, allow blind or low-vision users to navigate, read, and respond in digital

environments. Meanwhile, software that supports speech input, dictation, or voice commands enables people with limited dexterity to participate meaningfully in written communication and collaborative platforms. Moreover, the potential of AT goes beyond simple accommodation: emerging research sees assistive technology as integral to inclusive work design. In South Africa, for instance, studies explore how intelligent assistive technologies (IAT) can support visually impaired people in their daily digital interactions, enhancing not just employment outcomes but broader social inclusion. Nombakuse, Messerschmidt, Tsibolane, and Khalid (2025) argue that such IATs, when designed with universal access in mind, enable more independent participation, increase self-efficacy, and can offset some structural exclusions rooted in non-digital domains. AT's role in employment is not only about tools but also about organizational commitment. If companies adopt inclusive design practices and integrate accessibility into their digital infrastructure, AT can become part of the formal workflow rather than an optional add-on. However, this requires investment, support from IT departments, and a culture of flexibility that recognises AT users' legitimate needs.

Digital Divide and Inequities

Parallel to the promise of AT is a growing body of literature on the digital divide, the unequal access to and use of technology among people with disabilities. A pivotal qualitative study based in Canada illustrates how digital transformation in workplaces may disadvantage workers with disabilities, particularly when it comes to advanced workplace technologies (Jetha, Bonaccio, Shamaee, Banks, Bultmann, Smith, Tompa, Tucker, Norman, & Gignac, 2023). Interviewing policy makers, disability employment service providers, and future-of-work experts, the authors identify three intersecting dimensions of the divide: access to technology, personal resources, and digital job-skills. These disparities limit both the entry into and sustainable participation in digitally mediated work environments. More concretely, the study's participants noted that while digital tools have the potential to facilitate inclusion, the uneven distribution of devices, poor digital infrastructure in some regions, and insufficient training undermine this potential. In addition, even when access exists, there must be equity in deployment, ensuring that people with disabilities are not secondary in the rollout of new technologies, nor are they overburdened with the task of adapting systems themselves. Beyond employment, the digital divide also manifests in related digital services. In health care, for example, Pettersson, Johansson, Demmelmaier, and Gustavsson (2023) found that people with disabilities face more difficulty navigating eHealth services than those without impairment. The authors documented a "disability digital divide" in Sweden's

national eHealth portal, noting that people with communication, language, calculation impairments, and deaf-blindness perceived greater barriers than others. Such evidence underscores that digital inclusion is not just about work, it cuts across multiple domains of life, influencing individuals' ability to access essential services.

Remote and Hybrid Work as Accommodation

Remote and hybrid work models have been widely discussed as forms of reasonable accommodation, providing flexible arrangements that align with health and accessibility needs. Several policy- and community-oriented analyses suggest that remote work can reduce commuting burdens, lower stress for those with mobility or chronic health issues, and offer more control over daily schedules (ADA National Network, 2025; Waddington, 2025).While formal empirical studies remain relatively limited, practitioners note that flexible work arrangements can transform how accommodation is understood. Rather than relying solely on physical modifications in an office, accommodations extend into process and design: work hours, communication protocols, meeting practices, and digital tool selection all play a part in creating accessible environments. However, remote work is not a universal solution. Its benefits depend heavily on digital access, stable internet connectivity, and organisational willingness to adapt. Without these, remote work can exacerbate inequality: those without reliable home setups or adequate support may find themselves isolated or less productive, potentially reinforcing pre-existing disadvantages.

Special Challenges in Developing and Low-Resource Contexts

The challenges of digital inclusion are magnified in the Global South and other low-resource contexts. Large-scale studies demonstrate that web accessibility is far from universal in these regions. In a comparative analysis of 100,000 mobile websites across ten Global South countries, Bhuiyan, Varvello, Staicu, and Zaki (2025) found that only around 40% of sites met critical Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Blind and low-vision users are particularly disadvantaged, as many developers fail to include alt text or ARIA descriptions, which remain essential for screen-reader compatibility. Such digital accessibility deficits in the Global South reflect structural barriers: reliance on mobile devices with limited processing power, slow or unstable network infrastructure, low regulatory enforcement, and insufficient capacity among web developers. Bhuiyan et al. (2025) underscore that accessibility violations disproportionately harm those with visual impairments, and note that regulatory regimes in developing countries often lag behind in enforcing digital accessibility standards. Global-level reports also support this picture. The United Nations' *Disability and Development Report (2024)* highlights that a significant majority of the top one million

global websites do not comply with international accessibility standards; in particular, many government portals in the Global South fall short, exacerbating exclusion (United Nations, 2024). Within the employment context, new work published in *Research in Developmental Disabilities* explores how digitalization affects individuals with intellectual disabilities. A recent qualitative study shows that digital competence training, soft-skills development, and structured support are essential for enabling meaningful participation. The authors argue that digitalization can reduce workplace barriers but must be paired with targeted capacity-building to realize its potential as a lever for inclusion.

Institutional, Organisational, and Policy Barriers

Scholarship also points to the need for institutional commitment and policy frameworks to support digital inclusion. National and international bodies increasingly call for policies that embed accessibility in technology procurement, design, and regulation. In many jurisdictions, regulatory standards such as EN 301 549 have become technical benchmarks for digital accessibility. At the national level, employer-led policy initiatives are emerging. In Canada, the *Bridging the Gap* report from the Disability Inclusion Business Council (2024) highlights the need for inclusive design, disability awareness, and default accommodations (e.g., offering remote work by default). The report recommends that accommodation should be proactively integrated into policy rather than offered only upon disclosure. There is also growing recognition of digital accessibility as a human-rights issue. Global observances such as Global Accessibility Awareness Day (GAAD) underscore the importance of raising awareness, promoting inclusive design, and engaging developers, organisations, and individuals in building accessible digital systems.

Emerging Tensions and Paradoxes

Recent empirical research reveals nuanced and sometimes contradictory dynamics in how accessibility is experienced even within tech-forward organisations. A forthcoming study by Marathe and Piper (2025) explores the "accessibility paradox": many tech companies publicly commit to hiring workers with visual impairments, but their internal practices and digital infrastructure often fail to deliver on that promise. In their interviews with 20 blind and low-vision employees in technology firms, the authors found persistent misalignment between policy-level accessibility efforts and the lived reality of digital work: long-standing assumptions of productivity, insufficient accommodation processes, and limited negotiation space contributed to tensions. This paradox points to a deeper complexity: accessible hiring is not enough. For inclusion to be meaningful, organisations must align their systems, from digital infrastructure to performance management, with the needs and experiences of disabled

workers. This requires not just technology, but fundamental cultural change and power sharing.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing scholarship, several gaps remain:

- ***Adaptation of accommodation for digital contexts:*** There is limited research on how traditional accommodation practices (e.g., ergonomic assessments, desk modifications) are being reimagined for digital workplaces. Specifically, few studies analyse how accommodations are integrated into remote and hybrid workflows in under-resourced settings.
- ***Organisational culture and employer attitudes:*** While technical barriers are well documented, less attention has been paid to how employer beliefs, internal biases, and organisational capacity affect the provision of digital accommodation.
- ***Longitudinal and intersectional research:*** Much existing research is cross-sectional. There is a need for longitudinal studies that follow employees with disabilities over time to understand how digital inclusion evolves as technology and work practices change.
- ***Global South–specific empirical data:*** Although large-scale web-accessibility studies exist, there is a lack of rich qualitative research exploring how workers with disabilities in developing countries experience digital work, what AT they use, and how local policy contexts shape their inclusion.
- ***Governance and regulation gaps:*** While standards like EN 301 549 exist, research on how these are adopted, enforced, or adapted in non-Western countries is limited. There is also little inquiry into how government policies and labour regulation can support digital accommodations in national and regional contexts.

Conceptual Framework Emerging from the Literature

Synthesising the literature, a conceptual model emerges around three interconnected dimensions:

- ***Technological dimension***: This includes assistive technologies, inclusive design, accessible platforms, and digital infrastructure. AT and design must be deeply integrated rather than layered superficially.
- ***Institutional dimension***: Policies, organizational practices, and governance structures that mandate and support digital accessibility (e.g., procurement policies, accommodation procedures, national standards).

- ***Human dimension***: The capacities and resources of individuals, digital literacy, soft skills, self-advocacy, alongside the cultural and attitudinal readiness of organizations to engage with disability as a matter of inclusion.

These dimensions interact: for example, without institutional commitment, accessible technologies may not be adopted; without digital literacy, individual workers may not fully benefit; and even with all three present, disproportionate infrastructure (e.g., in the Global South) may limit inclusion.

Conclusion of the Literature Review

Recent scholarship reveals a rapidly evolving landscape in which digital technologies offer both real promise and persistent risk for workers with disabilities. Assistive technologies and inclusive design practices can substantially reduce barriers, but the benefits are unevenly distributed due to the digital divide and varying organisational commitment. While remote work has become a powerful form of accommodation, its full potential requires more than policy lip service: it demands deep institutional change, genuine resource investment, and sustained engagement with disability communities. In developing and low-resource contexts, limited digital infrastructure and poor accessibility of online platforms exacerbate exclusion, making the provision of AT and capacity-building even more urgent. Finally, emerging critiques such as the "accessibility paradox" illuminate the complexity of organizational inclusion efforts. Addressing these gaps will require multidisciplinary research, policy innovation, and sustained advocacy. Empirical studies that foreground the voices of workers with disabilities, especially in the Global South, are essential. Likewise, studies that examine how digital accessibility standards are implemented and enforced in under-resourced contexts can guide meaningful reform. By centering technology, policy, and human agency in a unified conceptual framework, future research can better inform employers, governments, and civil society on how to build truly inclusive digital workplaces, not just in theory, but in practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is primarily underpinned by the Social Model of Disability (SMD), complemented by the framework of differential work design. These theoretical lenses enable a systemic analysis of how digital environments and accommodation practices co-produce inclusion, or exclusion, for employees with disabilities in modern workplaces.

Social Model of Disability (SMD)

The Social Model of Disability reframes disability not as an individual medical condition, but as a relational phenomenon shaped by social, environmental, and institutional barriers (Into Work, 2023). In other words, it is societal structures, not simply impairments, that disable individuals. According to this model, accessible employment is not about "fixing" people, but rather about dismantling disabling barriers embedded in the built, digital, and organisational environment (Into Work, 2023). Applying the SMD to digital work contexts means viewing inaccessibility in software, platforms, and digital processes as systemic problems rather than personal deficits. For instance, digital exclusion can manifest when enterprises deploy collaboration platforms, video-conferencing tools, or productivity software that do not support screen readers, keyboard navigation, or alternative input devices. Such design choices reflect institutional rather than individual limitations, and thus demand structural change. Furthermore, research on digital government has shown how intersectional factors, such as age, gender, class, and impairment, intensify digital barriers and exclusion (TechReg, 2024). This aligns directly with the SMD's call to interrogate how social systems disable people, rather than locating the problem in their bodies or minds. By framing the inquiry through the SMD, this study asserts that true inclusion requires more than assistive technology. It requires systemic reform: policies, organisational cultures, and platforms must be designed so that all workers can participate without being forced to adapt themselves to inaccessible systems.

Differential Work Design (Using Personas)

Complementing the SMD, the concept of differential work design offers a practical and normative framework to make workplaces more inclusive in the era of digital transformation. Differential work design involves tailoring work environments, and digital systems, to diverse human needs, rather than assuming one-size-fits-all workflows (Kirchhoff, Kerdar, & Adolph, 2025). A particularly powerful method within this approach is the use of personas: research-informed, fictional characters that represent different impairment profiles and allow designers and decision-makers to anticipate barriers and design inclusive solutions (Kirchhoff et al., 2025). In the context of digital workplaces, personas help to embed accessibility early in design processes. For example, a persona might represent a user with a visual impairment who relies on screen readers, keyboard navigation, and text-to-speech tools; or a persona might capture someone with hearing loss who depends on real-time captioning or visual alerts. By bringing these user archetypes into design conversations, organisations can identify potential obstacles in software, workflows, or task assignments before they become real exclusion points (Kirchhoff et al., 2025). This helps raise employer awareness of accessibility

deficits and fosters a proactive rather than reactive accommodation mindset. Importantly, differential work design does not treat personas as substitutes for direct engagement with people with disabilities. Rather, personas complement participatory design. The methodological literature stresses that personas must be developed with input from disabled individuals to capture lived realism, avoid stereotypes, and reflect contextual factors (Kirchhoff et al., 2025). This helps ensure that digital work systems align not only with legal accessibility standards, but also with the real, subjective experiences of employees.

Integrating SMD and Differential Work Design

When combined, the Social Model of Disability and differential work design form a robust theoretical foundation for analysing digital inclusion in employment. The SMD offers a critical lens for diagnosing how digital systems disable, while differential work design offers actionable tools to remedy those disabling structures. Together:

- ***Structural critique***: SMD helps identify systemic barriers in organisational policies, digital infrastructure, and culture.
- ***Design praxis***: Differential work design (via personas) provides a method for translating critique into design interventions.
- ***Empowerment***: By centering the subjective experiences of people with disabilities, organisations can create work environments that not only comply with accessibility norms, but also respect diversity, agency, and dignity.
- ***Proactive inclusion***: Rather than waiting for an employee to disclose a need and then retrofitting, organisations can anticipate a range of needs in the design phase, reducing reactive retrofits and encouraging inclusive participation from the start.

This combined framework also underscores the importance of organisational accountability. Structural change guided by the SMD must be backed by design processes informed by personas; and design must feed back into institutional practices such as procurement, performance evaluation, and training.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design to synthesise existing knowledge on disability inclusion, digital work environments, and reasonable accommodation. A qualitative descriptive approach is well suited for research that aims to summarise, interpret, and organise evidence from diverse sources without imposing heavy theoretical abstraction (Neergaard et al., 2023). Because this study does not involve the collection of primary data from human participants, it does not require ethical clearance.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The study relied exclusively on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, technical reports, and policy documents published between 2022 and 2025. These publication years were selected to ensure that the analysis reflects the most recent developments in digital work, accessibility standards, and assistive technology trends. Targeted searches were conducted in academic databases including ***Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar***. The search strategy employed Boolean combinations of keywords such as:

- "assistive technology"
- "digital work"
- "remote work"
- "hybrid work"
- "reasonable accommodation"
- "disability inclusion"
- "digital accessibility"
- "inclusive design"

These keywords were chosen based on terminology widely used in contemporary disability and digital labour scholarship (International Labour Organization, 2023; World Health Organization, 2022).

To supplement academic literature, high-quality open-access reports from reputable institutions, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), World Health Organization (WHO), European Disability Forum (EDF), and OECD, were included. These organisations frequently publish empirical and policy-relevant research on digital accessibility and disability inclusion. Only documents available in full text were reviewed.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Three inclusion criteria guided the document selection process:

- ***Topical relevance***: Each source needed to address disability inclusion in the workplace, digital transformation, remote or hybrid work, assistive technologies, or accommodation practices.
- ***Publication window***: Only materials published from 2022 to 2025 were considered to ensure contemporary relevance.

- ***Evidence-based analysis***: Sources had to provide empirical findings, systematic reviews, or policy-based insights grounded in research.

Sources were excluded if they focused solely on medical rehabilitation, non-workplace digital accessibility, or if they lacked substantive evidence (e.g., opinion pieces without research grounding). Studies centred on children's education or clinical interventions were also excluded because they fell outside the scope of workplace accommodation.

Data Extraction and Analysis

The selected literature was analysed using thematic analysis, an approach well established in qualitative research for identifying patterns and meanings across data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) updated guidance on reflexive thematic analysis, the process included several steps:

- ***Familiarisation***: The researcher repeatedly read all documents to understand their central arguments and evidence.
- ***Coding***: Text segments related to digital barriers, assistive technologies, employer practices, organisational culture, remote work, and reasonable accommodation were systematically coded.
- ***Theme development***: Codes were grouped into broader themes such as *digital accessibility*, *technological barriers*, *benefits of digital work environments*, *employer responsibilities*, and *policy gaps*.
- ***Theoretical mapping***: Themes were then interpreted through the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, particularly the Social Model of Disability and differential work design.
- ***Synthesis***: Insights were synthesised into a coherent narrative describing how digital work environments interact with disability inclusion, and what forms of accommodation are required in modern workplaces.

Ensuring Rigour and Credibility

To enhance methodological rigour, this study followed recognised practices for qualitative secondary research, including transparency of search procedures and systematic organisation of sources (Snyder, 2022). Triangulation was achieved by incorporating literature from multiple geographical regions and disciplinary fields, labour studies, disability studies, occupational health, and digital technology research. This approach strengthened the validity of the analysis by enabling comparisons across contexts. Because secondary data inherently

reflect the limitations of the original studies, the synthesis carefully considered methodological strengths and weaknesses noted by authors. This critical stance formed part of the interpretive process and contributed to a balanced understanding of the current evidence landscape.

Ethical Considerations

As the study is based solely on publicly accessible documents and does not involve human participants, interviews, or personal data, formal ethical approval was not required. This aligns with widely accepted guidelines for secondary qualitative research (Snyder, 2022; Neergaard et al., 2023).

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the secondary literature reveals four (rather than just three) major, interrelated themes. These articulate the enabling potential of digital work and accommodation, but also highlight persistent risks, inequities, and structural tensions. The four primary findings are:

- *Digital environments and assistive technologies significantly enable inclusion, autonomy, and participation.*
- *Without inclusive design and equitable access, digital transformation can exacerbate existing inequities.*
- *Reasonable accommodation in the digital era requires expansion beyond physical adaptations to robust digital and organisational practices.*
- *Tensions and paradoxes persist in accommodation implementation and organisational priorities, revealing mismatches between policy and lived experience.*

  Each of these themes is elaborated below, with rich evidence drawn from recent scholarship.

Digital Environments and Assistive Technologies as Inclusion Enablers

A strong body of literature demonstrates that digital environments, combined with assistive technologies (AT), can empower workers with disabilities, improving job performance, participation, independence, and satisfaction. Tools such as screen readers, magnifiers, speech recognition software, accessible interfaces, and multimodal devices have been shown to dramatically lower or remove many of the traditional barriers to workplace engagement. For instance, Md Jani and colleagues (2025) highlight that screen readers, voice recognition, and accessible user interfaces not only help blind or low-vision users complete digital tasks, but also contribute to autonomy: these workers can independently manage email, collaborate

in shared documents, and participate in video- or chat-based meetings. While much of this evidence is emerging in developed contexts, it points to a universal principle: AT, when properly integrated, transforms not only what people can do but how they engage in work as full participants. Hybrid and remote work arrangements complement AT in powerful ways. Waddington (2025), in her case study of European universities, notes that hybrid working allows staff with fluctuating conditions (e.g., chronic pain, fatigue) to balance work demands and health needs by providing flexibility around location, schedule, and pace. The author finds that some disabled workers view remote work as a vital accommodation, enabling them to take breaks, rest, and manage their conditions more effectively while remaining productive. In similar fashion, other scholarship has found that remote or hybrid models reduce commuting burdens, a major barrier for many with mobility impairments or energy-limiting conditions (Waddington, 2025; MDPI case study). Employees report that working from home provides a safer, quieter, and more controlled environment, allowing them to better regulate sensory inputs and medical needs. Moreover, inclusive design efforts, especially those guided by universal design principles, further amplify AT's impact. In emerging research conducted in South Africa, for example, intelligent assistive technologies (IAT) tailored for visually impaired users have enabled more social participation and everyday functioning (Nombakuse, Messerschmidt, Tsibolane & Khalid, 2025). These IAT systems go beyond simply reading text aloud; they integrate contextual feedback, predictive navigation, and multimodal interaction that align more closely with users' lived routines. Users report increased autonomy, greater confidence in using digital systems, and more sustained engagement in social and work-related tasks. Thus, when digital tools and assistive technologies are available and well-designed, they serve not only as supports but as transformative enablers of workplace inclusion.

The Digital Divide: Access, Literacy, and Structural Barriers

Despite the promise of digital inclusion, the literature underscores persistent inequities that may hinder, or even reverse, gains in accessibility. The "digital divide" emerges as a central theme, concerning not just access to devices, but connectivity, digital literacy, and institutional support. A seminal qualitative study in Canada (Jetha et al., 2023) reveals that digital transformation may worsen employment inequities. Through interviews with workers with disabilities, policy makers, and employment service providers, the study found that many individuals lack access to the necessary technology, or the skills required to use advanced workplace systems effectively. Even where digital infrastructure is available, the knowledge gap, how to navigate, customise, or request assistive functionality, limits

meaningful participation. This digital divide is even more acute in low-resource settings. In South Africa, for example, Buthelezi, Zondo, Nxumalo, and Vilakazi (2024) documented large disparities in Internet access and device ownership among people with disabilities. Their study in KwaZulu-Natal found that many disabled participants lacked reliable or affordable connectivity. Without this foundational access, more sophisticated assistive tools, such as screen readers or remote collaboration platforms, remain out of reach. This infrastructural exclusion undermines any potential benefit that AT might bring. Furthermore, cost barriers loom large. A 2023 work-inclusion report (Dlearn, 2024) found that 36% of respondents identified the high price of assistive technologies as a major obstacle; 32% said they lacked knowledge on how to use the tools; and 23% pointed to low levels of digital accessibility in the systems they encountered (Dlearn, 2024). These data suggest that even when technology is theoretically available, economic and educational hurdles prevent equitable adoption. Institutional and policy-level gaps exacerbate the divide. Many employers lack clear strategies to support digital inclusion for workers with disabilities; their diversity or inclusion initiatives may omit considerations for AT funding, remote-work support, or digital literacy training. Deloitte's *Disability Inclusion @ Work* survey (2024) highlighted this disconnect: while many employees choose to disclose disabilities, only a minority formally request accommodations; among those who do, requests for assistive technologies (software, accessible communication tools) are frequently denied or rejected as "too costly" or "difficult to implement" (Deloitte, 2024). These structural shortcomings reflect that the digital divide is not just technological, it is deeply organisational.

Evolving the Concept of Reasonable Accommodation: Digital & Organisational Dimensions

A third major theme is that reasonable accommodation is increasingly understood to require more than physical adjustments. The digital transformation of work means that accommodations must address digital infrastructure, organisational practices, and policy frameworks. Research reveals that some employers are beginning to embed digital accommodations into their standard practices. Waddington (2025), in her European university study, documents how hybrid work is formally recognized as a form of reasonable adjustment for staff with disabilities. In her sample, fully remote work is offered in certain cases, while hybrid arrangements are negotiated to allow for breaks, quiet zones, and ergonomic needs. These adjustments are not ad hoc but integrated into institutional policies and employment contracts. However, provision is inconsistent. Many workers with disabilities find that their accommodation requests, especially for digital tools or remote work, are denied, only partial,

or insufficiently supported. An Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal article (2023) highlights that while flexible and remote work appeared as a "silver bullet" during the COVID-19 pandemic, not all disabled workers actually benefited. Data from the U.S. Current Population Survey and American Community Survey show that variables such as age, race, education, and the type of disability influence who secures remote or hybrid options (An Accommodation for Whom?, 2023). In many instances, accommodation is reactive rather than proactive: requests are made after the fact, rather than being anticipated in hiring, onboarding, or workstation design. The result is a patchwork system where some employees receive strong support while others remain excluded. This underscores the need for a shift: accommodation must be institutionalised, with digital inclusion baked into organisational design rather than treated as an exceptional concession.

Tensions, Paradoxes, and Power: The "Accessibility Paradox" and Organisational Misalignment

The analysis also uncovered significant tensions and paradoxes in how disability inclusion and digital work intersect in organisational settings. These tensions relate to misalignment between company policies, actual practices, productivity expectations, and the lived reality of employees with disabilities. One particularly powerful articulation comes from Marathe and Piper (2025), who coined the term "accessibility paradox." In their interviews with 20 blind and low-vision (BLV) employees in technology firms, they found that while companies publicly commit to hiring workers with disabilities, their internal accommodation processes and digital infrastructure often fall short. For instance, employees reported that accessible tools exist, but organisational assumptions about performance don't reflect their needs: managers tied productivity to "normal" patterns of work, undervaluing the additional time and effort required to work with accessible systems. This dissonance creates a tension between profit-driven metrics and genuine inclusion (Marathe & Piper, 2025). In parallel, the Nuffield Foundation's multi-year research project (Holland & Collins, 2023–2025) reveals how hybrid working must be designed carefully to avoid unintended negative outcomes. Their early findings suggest that while flexibility helps many disabled workers, it can also contribute to isolation, feelings of exclusion, or reduced access to networking and career-advancement opportunities if support is not intentional. Team norms, leadership practices, and digital meeting structures all factor into whether hybrid working is truly inclusive (Nuffield Foundation, 2023–2025). A further layer of tension occurs at the policy-to-practice boundary. Some organisations offer remote work as a legal accommodation, but do not systematically provide the technology or training necessary to make that remote work

accessible. Deloitte's 2024 survey (2024) found that many employees work from home because their homes are more accessible than employer premises, but at the same time, many accommodation requests are denied or under-resourced. The discrepancy suggests that while remote work is recognised in theory, its implementation often fails to deliver equity in practice. Finally, the digital divide itself introduces power imbalances. In contexts where assistive technologies are expensive or institutions do not budget for them, the burden of securing digital access often falls disproportionately on employees. The Work Inclusion report (Dlearn, 2024) found that many participants must pay for their own AT, self-learn how to use it, or rely on informal networks for support. This shifts the responsibility for accommodation from the employer or society to the individual, which undermines the principle of equitable inclusion.

Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, these themes paint a complex picture of digital inclusion for workers with disabilities. The promise of assistive technologies and flexible work arrangements is genuine, and, in many cases, already realized, but its full potential is constrained by systemic inequities, organisational misalignment, and structural neglect. On one hand, digital tools and remote/hybrid working have shown transformative value, enabling more autonomy, reducing physical barriers, and supporting participation in ways once unimaginable. On the other hand, if access to these tools is uneven, if accommodation is inconsistent, and if organisational culture and policy lag behind, digital transformation may entrench rather than dismantle disability exclusion. The paradox of accessibility, in where an employer may enthusiastically recruit people with disabilities but fail to support their actual working conditions, is particularly concerning. It underscores that inclusion is not simply a matter of representation, but of power, design, and institutional willingness to disrupt default norms. For inclusion to be meaningful, companies must align their ambition with tangible support: not just remote work or AT, but investment in technology, leadership training, team processes, and continuous feedback loops.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that digital environments and assistive technologies hold substantial promise for enhancing workplace inclusion for people with disabilities, but that promise is conditional. Where digital systems are intentionally designed for accessibility and where reasonable accommodation extends into digital and organisational practice, digital tools can reduce many long-standing physical and logistical barriers to employment. Where

design and policy lag, however, digital transformation risks entrenching or even widening exclusion. Below its an exploration of the theoretical implications, unpacked equity risks of the digital divide, examination of the practical and policy responses required, and point to research priorities.

Digital inclusion as systemic adaptation

The evidence aligns closely with the Social Model of Disability: disability becomes disabling through the interaction of impairment and social, institutional, and environmental barriers, not by virtue of impairment alone (WHO & UNICEF, 2022). Assistive technologies (AT) and accessible digital platforms change those interactions by reshaping the environment. The WHO's Global Report on Assistive Technology (2022) emphasises that AT can be life-changing, enabling education, social participation and employment, and calls for systemic investments (World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2022). Empirical workplace studies support this view: contemporary AT, from screen readers and magnifiers to speech-recognition and AI-enabled accessibility features, materially improves the ability of people with sensory, motor or cognitive impairments to perform digital tasks and to participate in collaboration workflows (WHO & UNICEF, 2022; Jetha et al., 2023). Crucially, this is not an argument that technology "fixes" individuals. Rather, accessible digital environments redistribute responsibility: they require organisations to adapt systems, procurement practices, and work routines so that diversity of ability is built into the infrastructure of work. This orientation is central to meaningful, not symbolic, inclusion.

The digital divide: layered inequities that threaten inclusion

A persistent theme in the literature is the digital divide: lack of access to devices, affordable and reliable connectivity, assistive products, or relevant skills prevents many people with disabilities from realising the promise of digital work. Jetha et al.'s (2023) qualitative study of Canadian stakeholders identified a three-part characterization of the digital divide, disparities in technology access, personal resources, and job skills, all of which shape who benefits from digital transformation and who is left behind. Similarly, regionally focused empirical work in South Africa shows substantial gaps in device ownership, connectivity and digital literacy among people with disabilities, undermining remote-work or AT-based inclusion strategies when applied without context-sensitive supports (Buthelezi, Zondo, Nxumalo, & Vilakazi, 2024). The divide has a geographical and regulatory dimension. Large comparative studies of web accessibility in Global South contexts found that many sites still fail critical WCAG checks; for example, a 2025 study that evaluated tens of thousands of sites across multiple Global South countries reported that only about 40% met necessary

accessibility criteria, with blind and low-vision users particularly disadvantaged (Bhuiyan, Varvello, Staicu, & Zaki, 2025). Together, these findings show that inclusion cannot be reduced to "add-on" assistive tools at the individual level; it requires investments in national and organisational infrastructure, regulation and capacity building.

Remote and hybrid work: accommodation with caveats

Remote and hybrid working arrangements emerged during the pandemic as powerful forms of accommodation for many employees with disabilities, reducing commuting burdens, enabling flexible pacing and facilitating a controlled sensory environment (EEOC, n.d.; ADATA, 2021). Legal and policy guidance now treats telework as a potentially reasonable accommodation where the essential functions of a job can be performed remotely (EEOC, n.d.; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023). Recent studies also document positive outcomes: hybrid arrangements can enable continued employment and improved health management for workers with fluctuating conditions (Waddington, 2025). Yet hybrid or remote work is not a universal remedy. Several studies caution against assuming remote work automatically improves equity. Benefits depend on reliable connectivity, employer support for AT and remote workplace setup, training, and inclusive team practices. Without those elements, remote work can create new problems: isolation, reduced access to informal learning and promotion pathways, or the burden of funding one's own assistive technologies (Waddington, 2025; Jetha et al., 2023). Courts and regulators are increasingly recognizing telework as an accommodation in specific circumstances, but employers still often struggle with operationalising it consistently (EEOC, n.d.; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023).

Differential work design and personas: operationalising inclusion

A practical and theoretically coherent response is to operationalise differential work design, designing tasks, tools and organisational processes for a diversity of functional profiles rather than retrofitting after exclusion emerges. Recent work on personas for inclusive design demonstrates how research-informed archetypes representing different impairment profiles can surface likely barriers early in the design process and shape procurement, interface design, and workflow policies (Kirchhoff, Kerdar, & Adolph, 2025). Personas complement participatory co-design: they are not substitutes for lived experience, but they enable design teams and managers to anticipate needs and embed accessibility by default. Bringing personas into hiring and onboarding, procurement specifications, and product selection has several advantages. It reduces the stigma around accommodation requests by normalising multiple work pathways; it helps IT and HR budget realistically for AT and support; and it

encourages user testing with disabled employees before large rollouts. These shifts operationalise the Social Model by converting systemic critique into concrete design choices.

Organisational culture, procurement and resourcing

The literature emphasises that accessibility is a cross-cutting organisational responsibility. Procurement decisions, buying closed systems without accessibility guarantees, often lock organisations into inaccessible platforms for years. Public procurement that mandates WCAG compliance and accessibility testing can change market incentives; conversely, weak procurement leaves employees to cover their own accommodation costs (Bhuiyan et al., 2025; WHO & UNICEF, 2022). Organisational budgets and HR processes should therefore incorporate ongoing AT procurement and technical support, not only one-off purchases. Training for managers is also critical: hybrid teams require different supervision skills, and without manager competence, remote accommodations can become a source of bias rather than inclusion (Waddington, 2025).

Policy implications: regulation, infrastructure and incentives

At the policy level, three priorities emerge. First, expand legal definitions and enforcement mechanisms so that "reasonable accommodation" explicitly covers digital dimensions, accessible software, remote work options, and funded AT, and not only physical adaptations (EEOC, n.d.; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023). Second, governments should require public-sector digital services to meet WCAG standards and support private-sector compliance through incentives, technical assistance and accessible procurement rules; recent national efforts (for example, Taiwan's accessibility certifications) illustrate how regulatory action paired with technical support can raise the bar (Ministry of Digital Affairs, Taiwan, 2025). Third, public investment in connectivity and subsidised AT for low-income or rural workers with disabilities is essential to close the infrastructural dimension of the digital divide (World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2022; Buthelezi et al., 2024).

Limits, trade-offs and risks

A sober view must acknowledge trade-offs and lingering risks. Scaling AT and remote work across resource-constrained contexts requires funds and specialist personnel; small organisations and countries with limited budgets may struggle without targeted assistance. Personas and differential work design must be developed with people with disabilities to avoid stereotyping. And remote work can worsen invisibility: if disabled employees are less visible to decision makers, they may lose out on promotion or informal networks (Waddington, 2025). Finally, digital inclusion must not shift the burden of reasonable accommodation from employers and the state to individual workers who must procure, learn,

and maintain their own assistive systems, a form of privatised accommodation that reproduces inequality (Jetha et al., 2023).

Research implications and priorities

The literature highlights key empirical gaps that future research should address. Longitudinal and comparative studies are needed to track how digital inclusion evolves, which combinations of AT, managerial practice and policy produce sustainable employment outcomes across contexts. Participatory research that centres the voices of disabled workers in the Global South is particularly scarce; such research would inform context-sensitive interventions that are feasible given local infrastructures (Bhuiyan et al., 2025; Buthelezi et al., 2024). Finally, intervention studies that test organisational bundles (procurement + manager training + AT subsidies) would clarify which multi-component strategies deliver the best equity outcomes.

Conclusion of the Discussion

In sum, the digital era creates real opportunities for reimagining inclusion, but realising those opportunities requires sustained systemic change. The Social Model of Disability highlights that accessibility is a structural question; differential work design and personas give organisations practical means to translate that perspective into concrete digital practices. Policymakers must expand the remit of accommodation to encompass digital and organisational dimensions, fund infrastructure and AT, and strengthen enforcement of accessibility standards. Only then will digital transformation shift from a potential amplifier of inequality to a durable engine of inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study's exploration of digital work environments and reasonable accommodation underscores a powerful, but complicated, opportunity: digitalization can meaningfully enhance inclusion for people with disabilities, if it is handled with intention, equity, and systemic commitment. The results and discussion show that digital tools and flexible work arrangements are not just add-ons, but foundational to rethinking how disability and work interact in the twenty-first century. At its best, the digital workplace reconfigures barriers into enablers. Assistive technologies, like screen readers, magnification tools, voice recognition systems, and alternative input interfaces, can significantly reduce or remove obstacles associated with sensory, physical, or cognitive impairments. With remote or hybrid work models, employees are offered flexibility in time and location that was previously difficult or impossible. This flexibility supports those managing mobility challenges, chronic illness,

fatigue, or care responsibilities, allowing for more sustainable and self-determined work lives. In turn, this can lead to improved job performance, greater autonomy, and higher job satisfaction. For many, inclusion in digital work is not simply about presence; it's about meaningful participation. Importantly, this shift aligns with the Social Model of Disability, which posits that disability is less a function of an individual's impairment and more a product of social, institutional, and environmental design. Digital accommodation, therefore, is not about "fixing" individual workers, but about adapting the systems around them, designing workflows, software platforms, and organisational policies in inclusive ways. When organizations embed accessibility into the backbone of their digital infrastructure and culture, they offer more than a workaround; they reimagine how work can be structured to value diverse abilities as part of the normal flow of operations.

However, the promise of digital inclusion is circumscribed by persistent and structural equity gaps. The digital divide remains a real and concerning barrier. Not all workers with disabilities have access to the necessary devices, stable internet connections, or the digital literacy to make full use of assistive tools or remote work platforms. These divides are often more severe in low-resource settings, where cost, infrastructure limitations, and regulatory gaps compound difficulties. Connectivity may be unreliable; data can be expensive; and public or private sector support for assistive tools may be minimal. This unevenness means that without deliberate intervention, digitalization risks creating a two-tier system: one in which well-resourced individuals and organizations reap the benefits of inclusion, while others are left behind. These structural inequities threaten to reinforce existing social and economic divides, undermining the very goals of inclusion that digital transformation purports to offer. To truly seize the opportunities presented by digital work, organizations must adopt a holistic accommodation strategy, one that extends far beyond physical adaptations or isolated software solutions. Key components of such a strategy should include:

- ***Digital Accessibility by Design***: Organizations must ensure that all digital tools (communication platforms, project management systems, collaboration software) are accessible by default. This goes beyond retrofitting; accessibility must be baked into procurement, development, and evaluation.
- ***Flexible Work Models***: Remote and hybrid work options should not be ad hoc or temporary measures. Instead, they should be codified into policy as standard accommodation pathways. This involves rethinking job roles, performance evaluation,

team norms, and management practices to support flexibility without penalizing employees.

- ***Assistive Technology Support***: Provision of AT is necessary but not sufficient. Employers should invest in ongoing technical support, maintenance, training, and user empowerment. Workers must have reliable access to up-to-date tools, and to IT support staff who understand accessibility.
- ***Training and Cultural Change***: Inclusion requires more than tools, it requires people. Training should be provided for all staff (not just those with disabilities) on digital accessibility, disability-awareness, and inclusive working practices. Organisations should foster cultures that value adaptation, feedback, and continuous improvement.
- ***Inclusive Onboarding and Procurement***: Hiring, onboarding, and procurement policies should embed the use of personas and other design tools to anticipate a diversity of needs. By involving people with different impairment profiles in design and hiring processes, organizations can pre-emptively address many accessibility challenges.
- ***Partnerships & Advocacy***: In under-resourced contexts, corporations, non-profits, and governments need to collaborate. Organizations should partner with disability advocacy groups, academic institutions, and public agencies to ensure that digital infrastructure, assistive technology, and training programs align with local needs and capacities.

Departing from a policy perspective, our findings strongly support the need to modernize regulatory frameworks around disability and accommodation. Government bodies should update legal definitions of "reasonable accommodation" to explicitly include digital tools, remote work, and assistive technologies, not just modifications to physical environments. Accessibility standards must be more rigorously enforced for digital platforms, including public and private applications and websites, for example, through mandatory adoption of internationally recognized standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Meanwhile, public investment in broadband infrastructure, subsidized assistive-device programs, and digital literacy programs is essential, especially in low- and middle-income settings. On the research front, significant gaps remain that future studies must address. Empirical work in **low-** and middle-income countries is particularly sparse; these contexts present unique barriers and opportunities, shaped by unequal infrastructure, limited regulatory capacity, and different cultural attitudes toward disability. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand how digital inclusion evolves over time, especially as hybrid work becomes more entrenched. Participatory research, which centers the voices and leadership of

workers with disabilities, must guide the development of personas, design practices, and policy interventions. Intervention-based research (e.g., randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs) could test how combinations of AT provision, manager training, and procurement reforms impact inclusion outcomes and job sustainability. Moreover, future research should examine how organizational power dynamics shape inclusion. The "accessibility paradox", where organisations publicly prioritize inclusion but fail to operationalize it, is an important field of inquiry. What incentives, structures, or leadership practices enable real alignment between policy commitment and lived experience? How can organizational accountability be strengthened so that digital inclusion is not a symbolic gesture but a measurable, sustainable practice?

Broader Implications

The implications of this work extend beyond individual organizations or national contexts. As digital economies continue to shape global labour markets, the manner in which we design and regulate work will determine whether the benefits of digital transformation are equitably distributed. Inclusion in digital work is a matter of social justice. When digital inclusion is prioritized effectively, it can support not just economic participation for people with disabilities, but broader societal integration, improving access to education, civic engagement, and social networks. At a normative level, reimagining workplace inclusion for a digital age invites us to rethink our understanding of work itself. If digital environments can accommodate diverse abilities, then the standard model of 9–5 office work, built on the assumption of a "universal worker", may no longer make sense. Instead, work can become more flexible, more human-centred, and more responsive to variation in ability, lived experience, and context.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, because the study relies primarily on secondary data, the richness and specificity of local experiences may not be fully captured: we may miss important nuances in how digital access and accommodation play out in particular industries, geographies, or communities. Second, the literature itself is uneven: while there is growing scholarship from high-income countries, fewer recent rigorous studies examine digital inclusion in low- and middle-income settings, limiting the generalizability of some conclusions. Third, forward-looking design frameworks such as differential work design and personas are promising but not yet widely tested in employment contexts, particularly in corporate or public-sector settings; their practical scalability remains to be demonstrated.

Final Reflections

Digital transformation offers a profound opportunity to rethink what inclusion means, and how disability and work intersect. By treating accessibility as a design and policy imperative, not a special case, organizations can build more inclusive, equitable workplaces that reflect the full diversity of human ability. Achieving this will require sustained leadership, investment, and commitment, but the potential payoff is considerable: not just more equitable employment, but a paradigm shift in how we conceive of work in the digital age. As we move further into a future of remote-first, hybrid, and digitally mediated work, inclusion cannot be an afterthought. It must be a foundation. And by centring digital accommodation, we take a meaningful step toward workplaces where disability is not a barrier, but a dimension of diversity that enriches how we design, collaborate, and succeed.

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