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Interview with Board Member Steve Ewell about Accessibility at CES 2024 [1]

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Steve Ewell is a valued member of the Coleman Institute advisory board. He is the executive director of the CTA Foundation, a charitable foundation with the mission of linking seniors and people with disabilities with technology to enhance their lives. The CTA also produces the most powerful tech event in the world, the Consumer Electronics Show (CES). After this year's successful show in Las Vegas, we sat down to interview Steve about the accessibility trends he saw at CES 2024.
CES is an incredibly large show. This year saw roughly 135,000 attendees from all over the world. About 40% of them were international, representing 150 countries. There were 4,300 exhibitors, of which 1,400 were startups. The show is so large that if you spent 10 seconds at every exhibit you would not be able to see them all.

This year's show was Steve's 13th year at CES. He has found it interesting to see the progression of where technology is focused. He has seen the switch from shows focused on TVs and high-end audio equipment to smart vehicles/homes, digital health, and artificial intelligence (AI). Even the definition of what consumer technology is has changed. Last year's show had the first agriculture technology keynote with a John Deer self-driving tractor. This year's show had the first beauty tech keynote, Loreal, which included an accessible makeup application. In fact, several keynotes this year talked about accessibility including Walmart and Intel.

The sheer size of CES demonstrates why it is such an important platform for accessibility.

Steve and his team have been working hard to build up accessibility at the show and highlight why it is such an important topic. This year, it really became one of the main stories at the show. Steve was thrilled to witness exhibitors building accessibility into their exhibits front and center, and he saw lots of startups focused on accessibility. Some of the most common tech categories with an accessibility element included smart home products, digital health apps, and vehicle technology.

Accessibility was also built directly into the show. There was an accessibility roundtable to gather industry members and discuss what is and is not working. This year's roundtable was the largest one yet, with 75-80 people participating. Interest in the roundtable discussion has grown so much that organizers struggled to balance how to include as many people as possible while also keeping the event conversational. The roundtable discussions were focused on two main topics – 1) AI and accessibility, and 2) accommodations around hybrid work environments.

There were also panels focused on accessibility. Topics included accessible gaming, accessible vehicle design, over the counter hearing aids, neurodiverse employment, and universal design. Videos of these panels are available on CES website [4].

One highlight of the show was its pitch competition. Eight health tech companies were invited to pitch their products. The judges voted Augmental [5] as the winner, which is a small device that sits in your mouth and allows movements made by the tongue and face to control your phone and other devices. The pitch competition also had an audience-voted winner – Proxie Health [6], which is an AI-enabled app to help providers, health plans, families and seniors coordinate care to encourage safer, smarter aging in place.

Examples of exhibitors related to tech for cognitive disabilities included Making Space [7], a talent acquisition and learning platform that creates new pathways to employment and career advancement for disabled people, RAZ Mobility [8], mobile assistive technology and related services for people with disabilities, and Aspiritech [9], a quality assurance company with 95% of its workforce comprised of neurodiverse employees to empower individuals on the autism spectrum to fulfill their potential through meaningful employment.

CES partnered with AARP to form the AgeTech Collaborative and highlight the promise of AI for better aging. They highlighted exciting innovative technologies in five categories – accessibility, fintech, startups, digital health, and smart homes and appliances. Hosting over 20 panels and demonstrations, they focused the CES spotlight on how technology and AI can help older adults live longer, better, and more independently. AARP's section included companies like Voiceitt [10], an app for non-standard speech recognition, XanderGlasses [11], glasses with transcriptions, and TranscribeGlass [12], another transcription glasses company.

CES 2024 was attended by many disability advocates including the American Council of the Blind, Hearing Loss Association of America, and National Black Deaf Advocates. Steve emphasized the importance of the exhibiting companies hearing directly from these advocates so they can incorporate disability design into their products.

At next year's CES, Steve hopes to see a continued focus on accessibility. His goal is to build conversations between the accessibility technology world and the general consumer technology world. He sees lots of overlap between the two spaces and opportunities for both groups to reach even more people if they work together. The Coleman Institute is amazed by

Steve’s work and feels incredibly lucky to have him on their advisory board!

Anyone interested in learning morning about CES 2024 can check out the show’s videos [13], articles [14], and keynotes [15]. The CES Tech Talk Podcast [16] is another excellent resource to check out. You can also learn more about the CTA Foundation at their website [17].

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