



**NCTI 2009 Innovators Conference**

***Lunch Keynote***

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**Transcript**

Thank you very much, Tracy. When Tracy emailed me several, several months ago, this was when I first started- maybe April or something like that, and she said, "We want you to come on November 17<sup>th</sup>," I emailed back. I said, "That's my birthday, I won't be doing anything on my birthday." Now since then I've learned, wait a minute – I work at the White House so – I'll be working tomorrow no matter what. I'll probably have several different appointments, so I probably could have come on the 17<sup>th</sup> but anyway – I'm glad to be here, it's great to be here with you all at this wonderful conference.

Technology for me is very personal. Technology/education is very personal for me as are many other things dealing with people with disabilities, but this has a particular interest for me. As a person who is blind and who has used accessible [or] assistive technology I should say, many, many years of my life, it is very, very high up there on being primarily responsible for me excelling, getting through high school, getting through particularly college at the University of Illinois, and then on to get my law degree and MBA. Without assistive technology, without the use of Window Eyes to read my email and write my papers, without the use of the Braille Speak early on, now the Braille Note and other assistive technology devices, I would not have been as successful in getting through college and law school and, in my early career, as practicing law at Winston and Strawn in Chicago. So it is extremely important that we improve technology, that we support technology in terms of education, technology broadly, [and] make sure that it is inclusive for people with disabilities.

When I was in undergraduate work, when I first started in undergraduate work at University of Illinois in 1991, one year after the ADA had passed, the thing that was amazing is that, and I tell people this now and it's almost unfathomable to believe it now, but then I had to go to class, and probably like many other persons who are blind, it's not unique but, we had to go to class and record class and then go home and write out the notes in Braille long hand on a Braille writer because there was no device at that point that we could take to the classroom and write out your notes like you can now with the Braille Note or any sort of Braille reader. So we had to go and it took twice as long, to go and record the class and then go home and write down the notes. It kind of helped you study a little bit but it was twice as long. Until the middle of my years that was able to change, but it shows you the advances in technology. It shows you the



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importance that technology plays in our education system, and in ensuring that everybody can receive a world class education.

That is the commitment of this President and this administration, to ensure that each and every child, to ensure that each and every person, including the 54 million people who live with disabilities and the children have access to technology and have access to a world class education because it's the only way that we are going to excel; and it's the only way that we are going to get to the next level, is if we have access to the technology that we need to be successful. And I think this administration and this President have set the groundwork and set the foundation for the next four, and hopefully eight years, to bring about significant changes in education and in technology for people with disabilities. And I'd like to just touch on a few basic areas today, to demonstrate how we've tried to lay the foundation and begin the work of changing the landscape for people with disabilities and children with disabilities in our education system and in our everyday life. And those three areas that I'll touch on briefly today are the FCC, the Department of Justice, and then broadly some initiatives that we have launched.

Let me begin with the FCC because I think that it is important when we look at technology. And we know that the FCC plays a huge role and is leading the President's effort for broadband initiative so that we can bring the internet across the country to every American, every home across our country: rural areas, cities, and everywhere. And we know that for accessible technology for people with disabilities, if that accessibility is not included in the beginning, then it becomes a real hardship to include it on the backend- then we're pulling at your coattails. This administration is seeking to change that framework so that we're including from the very beginning, and so that people with disabilities don't have to yank on coattails and say, "Hey wait, did you forget about us? Did you forget about making sure that this technology needs to be accessible?" And the President has put an extraordinary individual, Julius Genachowski at the head of the FCC, and many of you probably know Julius and know his story: that his father was a person who was blind, and Julius has a long history of supporting accessibility and technology for people with disabilities... Julius is a long time personal friend of the President as well, went to Harvard with the President. Before Julius was appointed, before it was public, I sat down and talked with Julius, before his confirmation was public I should say, after he was announced to lead the FCC, I sat down and I talked with Julius about disability issues. He assured me that we were going to work extremely hard to ensure that people with disabilities are not left behind in communications, in the broadband initiative, in communications, and just broadly in what the FCC oversees, and I think we've seen evidence of that as we've moved along here in this administration. I myself have been to a couple of different initiatives and programs that the FCC has held on broadband initiatives to get the feedback and information from people with disabilities so that the broadband initiative plan, when rolled out, is going to



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include people with disabilities in accessible technology, built in from the groundwork. And I think Julius is also committed that we are going to strengthen the Disability Rights Office at the FCC, and we're going to make it a bigger player and a more important player in what the FCC is trying to do. I know he remains committed to that effort. And so we are starting with the FCC, or the FCC is one of the pillars of the ways that I think that we are going to change accessible technology for people with disabilities.

The second area I'd like to talk about is some of our broad initiatives. And I think what we've tried to do in this administration is say that America broadly, the United States of America, is once again saying that people with disabilities are important, are significant, and America is once again ready to join leaders around the world to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities, to ensure equal rights, to ensure civil rights, and to ensure human rights for all people with disabilities. And to that end, the President in July of this year, celebration of the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and one year after we passed the ADA Amendments Act, directed Ambassador Susan Rice to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the first new human rights treaty of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And as you all know, this historic convention really provides a framework of equality for all, whether it be in employment, whether it be in technology, whether it be in healthcare, whether it be in education. This convention, the signing of this convention, signals this President's and this administration's recommitment to the protection of human rights and autonomy for the 650 million people with disabilities around the world. Technology is going to play a critical role in that, education is going to play a critical role in making sure that every person with a disability has access to the educational materials, has access to the technology that they need. And a lot of what we're trying to do is set an example and lead by example from the top and from the country's CEO that this is important to me, and therefore it should be important to you in your state, it should be important to you in your city, it should be important to you in your county, in your local school district, in your school, to your teacher and in your classroom, and to your parents that people with disabilities matter, people with disabilities need to be on a level playing field, and people with disabilities need to have the same opportunities as every other American. The way you set that example is you do it and you show it publicly that these are the things that we want to do and signing the UN Convention I think was a major step toward that goal.

We're working on ratification right now for that, for the UN Convention, and that process is under way and we look forward to a swift ratification once the President submits the UN Convention to the Senate for advice and consent.

The third thing that I'd like to talk to you about and touch on briefly is our commitment to the enforcement of civil rights for people with disabilities and I think this plays a critical role



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whether you're talking about education, whether you're talking about accessibility and providing equal access to accessible materials or to technology, and the President's commitment on civil rights was a foundation of his campaign platform for people with disabilities and improving enforcement, whether it be in IDEA, or whether it be in other areas, but the protection of the civil rights for people with disabilities [is key].

He's made really a phenomenal appointment or really several phenomenal appointments at the Department of Justice to ensure this commitment to civil rights. Tom Perez, who's a long time advocate and supporter of people with disabilities, is the Assistant Attorney General, Head of Civil Rights at the Department of Justice and in the disability rights section. [He is] joining John Wodatch, of course, who's been over there for a while. You have Sam Bagenstos leading up the Disability Civil Rights section and Mazen Baswari who's also working in the Disability Civil Rights section. And as many of you know, Sam is an absolute pillar in the legal community for civil rights and the protection of civil rights for people with disabilities and when I talk to people all the time I say to them the way you really start to make a change after you set an example is you put the people in place who can do the job, you put the people in place who are willing, able, and committed to carrying out the mission of the President. That team at the Department of Justice is just such a team. I've worked with Sam already, and Mazen, and I've worked with Tom during the transition team and also he's just now gotten over to DOJ so we've had a couple of conversations. They are so committed and really unleashing the Department of Justice to protect the rights of people with disabilities around the country. So we are really excited about their work.

I've already – one of the things I do at the White House is sometimes I get a copy of their speeches before they go out and give them and we look at them if we have any comments. Just getting some of the speeches from Tom and Sam and it's just phenomenal, it's just phenomenal to see people that are really committed to protecting the rights and carrying out the mission of the President. It's not something where we have to say, "Hey wait a minute this is where we..." they understand what we're trying to get accomplished and they're right on board in carrying out the mission. So we are very excited about the Department of Justice and the efforts that they are undertaking.

And the last area that I would like to talk to you about is specifically education and some of the things that we are trying to do. I think broadly we obviously are committed to equal education for people with disabilities as I mentioned earlier, and I think when you look at what we have done and you look at how we did it, it signals that this is important to this president no matter what. When the chips were down, when the economy was struggling, and we were in a recession, and when everyone or lots of people said, "Well we're going to see right now that once we get in [hard] economic times people with disabilities are going to be left behind." I



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said, “Well, I don’t think that’s going to be the case.” And so when we passed the American Recovery and Re-investment Act, the historic commitment of 12.2 billion dollars to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act is a credit to this President’s understanding that even when times are tough, people with disabilities need to have their seat at the table on an equal footing, in an equal playing field just like everybody else. That commitment of 12.2 billion dollars demonstrates that commitment. And I get stories from across the country all the time from our Recovery Act reporting where I know that school districts, local schools, resource rooms, accessibility officers, teachers, are writing. Stories are being [told] where, because of this money from the Recovery fund they are able to buy more assistive technology, teachers have been able to keep their jobs in resource rooms, or special ed teachers, they have been able to make schools more accessible to comply with the ADA. Just provide additional resources that would not have been able to have been provided or might have had to have been cut but not for the Recovery plan. And I think when we look at it, when we look at the President said he is going to commit to increasing funding for IDEA, this signals that commitment, and this demonstrates that people with disabilities in the education arena are not going to be forgotten, even when times are tough.

So we are committed to keeping up the work for education and we are working daily on other avenues, on other areas to help improve education for students with disabilities across the country.

And so as I wrap up, I just want to again re-iterate that there are lots of things that we are doing for people with disabilities, but education, technology, very personal matters to me and very personal actually to the White House. And I like to tell this story and I’ll close with this story. If we can get it done at the White House, you can get it done anywhere, and that’s accessibility because when I got there of course, you know everybody uses the Blackberry, and the Blackberry of course is not quite yet accessible, they’re working on it and they tell me all the time, they’re working on it. And so... you know, there’s a huge problem with security at the White House, all types of issues in trying to get an accessible device so I could read my email over a Blackberry-type device, because of course, you know, you always got to be in touch. There’s a gentleman over at the White House who came in with us, his name is Brooke, and he has absolutely been a dynamo. I’ve got my own entire computer team that is just dedicated to figuring out accessibility issues for me, whether it be my Blackberry device, whether it be that I need a talking caller ID for my phone, or my laptop isn’t working. I’ve got my own team and at the beginning they were doing daily reports, I think now they’re only doing weekly reports on what’s the latest issue, have we solved it for Kareem. And I think that that demonstrates this administration’s commitment because it comes from the top down and that it’s important and that we’re going to get it right. And we got it right, and so I now use a, wonder if I should be saying the brand names here, uh... anyway – somebody’s going to be happy – I use a Moto Q9



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phone with a Moto Speak on the phone. And I should say, I don't know if anybody from TALKS is here too, TALKS has a product that works with, you could have gotten a different phone from AT&T and it works with TALKS as well but this is the first one I found, so I don't know if Susan is here but she would want me to point that out. But I use a Moto Q9, with Mobile Speak and I'm able to access my email, just like everybody else and be tethered to my office just like everybody else. We've been working on this talking caller ID, it's this whole system it's going to be a computer; they're installing it very soon. But I think it's important to point that out. Now I've had other people from other government agencies who are blind say, "Hey you're able to get your email over a blackberry like device?" And I say, "Yeah" and I tell them about it, and they say, "Hey I'm going to go tell my tech people about it," and I say, "Well tell your tech people to call Brooke over here if they have any questions, he'll get them straight." So we are really trying to lead by example whether it be in my personal situation or just generally across the board just for people with disabilities and so I'm sure that many of you I know in here and many of you I've worked with and many of you I'm sure I will work with in the years to come, and we look forward to working with you.

I thank Tracy for inviting me to join you all at this wonderful conference. Thank you very much.