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How Assistive Technology Is Unlocking Human Potential In The Era Of AI

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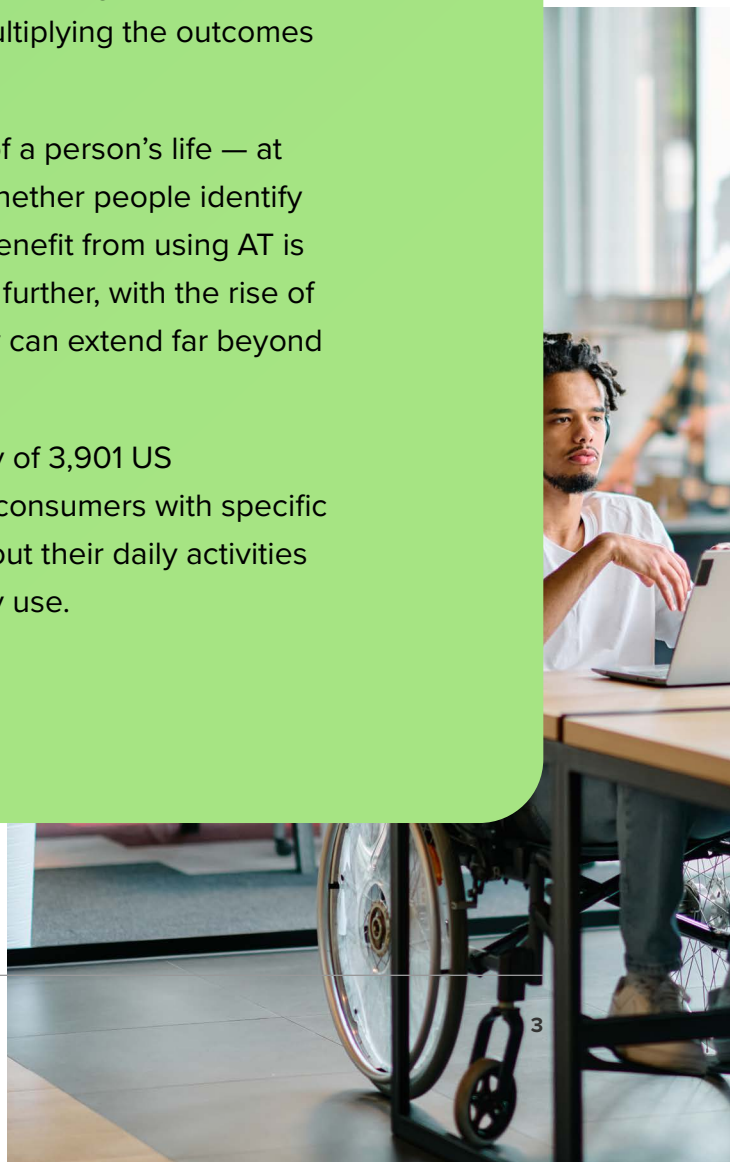
Executive Summary

In 2003, Microsoft partnered with Forrester Research to explore how people were using assistive technology (AT) in their lives.[1] Assistive technology refers to any device, software, or equipment that helps people perform tasks more easily. This can include screen readers, magnifiers, voice recognition software, and other tools that enable access to digital content and services. The study provided a foundational understanding of accessibility needs, demonstrating how AT has the potential to powerfully extend and enhance consumer experiences.

In June 2025, Microsoft and Forrester teamed up again to refresh the results of that original study. This new study confirms what close watchers of technology already know: Assistive technology empowers everyone, individually and collectively. People can do more powerful, collaborative, and inspiring things together but only when they harness new technologies that enable them. This creates an even greater need for assistive features to be built into these tools, multiplying the outcomes everybody can achieve together.

The value of technology extends across all facets of a person's life — at home, at play, at work, and in civic engagement. Whether people identify as disabled or not, the likelihood that people can benefit from using AT is significantly higher today than it was in 2003.[2] And further, with the rise of AI, the expanded world of empowered accessibility can extend far beyond our ability to imagine it.

This study presents the findings of an online survey of 3,901 US consumers, including a subset that consists of 891 consumers with specific disabilities. The survey asked these consumers about their daily activities and use of assistive features in the technology they use.



Key Findings

Assistive technology features aren't just nice to have — they're essential. On average, consumers reported using assistive technology for at least six different activities in the past month.

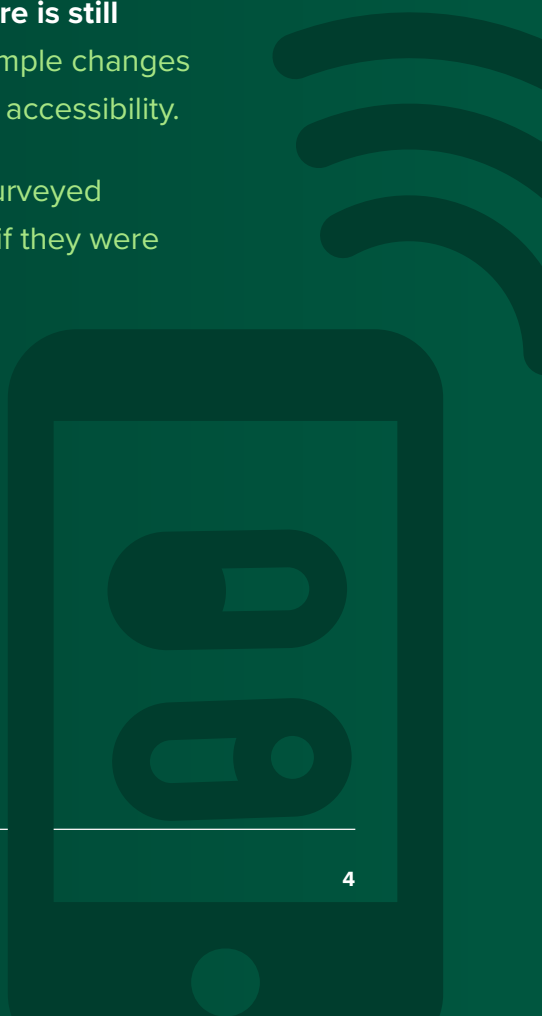
Assistive technology could benefit most people. Seventy percent of respondents noted experiencing some level of difficulty with daily tasks related to vision, hearing, learning/cognition, mobility, and/or mental health.

Intentional employer focus on assistive technology breeds employee loyalty. Fifty-five percent of respondents stated that they feel a stronger commitment to their employers when companies prioritize assistive tools and features.

Assistive technology provides nontangible emotional benefits. Assistive technology helps users perform specific functions but there are additional benefits of performing those functions: 72% of users felt greater confidence in daily activities, and 64% felt they could be their more authentic selves.

Assistive technology is better now than it used to be — but there is still room for improvement. Over 75% of respondents agreed that simple changes to process and/or tools could make a big difference in improving accessibility.

AI is enhancing existing assistive technology. The majority of surveyed consumers (66%) said they would use assistive tools more often if they were enhanced with AI capabilities.



Assistive Technology Use Is Pervasive Across All Users

Most people use assistive features every day, and many don't even realize it. Voice assistants, closed captions, screen magnifiers, and dark mode are just a few examples of tools that support a wide range of needs. On average, people with disabilities reported engaging in 7.9 activities using assistive features in the past month, compared to 6.5 for those without disabilities, which is still high (see Figure 1 for list of features). The extensive use of these features suggests that assistive capabilities aren't nice to have — they're essential to improve the experience of everyone.

> Extensive use of assistive features suggests that these capabilities aren't just nice to have — they're essential.

Assistive technology has improved and changed significantly since the original study 22 years ago. Today, smartphones, computers, and smart TVs are the most common devices on which consumers are using assistive features. Those advancements — smartphones in particular — contribute substantially to today's broader use of assistive features. Even more, current advancements with AI are further augmenting the capabilities of assistive technology, and consumers just need more exposure to them to understand the benefits the technologies offer.

FIGURE 1

“Which of the following activities have you done in the past month?”

Average overall number of activities:	Averages based on disability:	
6.4	7.9 IDENTIFY AS DISABLED*	6.5 DO NOT IDENTIFY AS DISABLED

Base: 3,010 US consumers aligned roughly to general population demographics from the US census
*Base: 891 US consumers who self-reported having a disability
Source: Forrester's Q2 2025 Accessibility Technology and AI study [E-63649]

Assistive Technology Can Benefit Most People

The notion that assistive technology is designed to help only those with formally diagnosed disabilities is incorrect. While the impact may be larger for those with disabilities, the potential to benefit from AT extends to a much broader group of users.

70%

of respondents noted experiencing some level of difficulty with daily tasks.

To identify who could potentially benefit from AT, we asked respondents if they have any level of difficulty with certain functions (e.g., vision, hearing, learning/cognition, mobility, mental health, and neurodiversity) when engaging in common, daily activities. Overall, 70% of respondents noted experiencing some level of difficulty with daily tasks. This highlights the breadth of potential impact for assistive technologies.

To better understand the magnitude of this potential impact, we classified respondents into three categories based on the difficulties they report (these are the same categories used in the original 2003 study). The categories are as follows:

- **Users "very likely" to benefit from the use of AT.** Consumers in this category indicated that they experience "a lot of difficulty" or "extreme difficulty" with at least one function when engaging in daily activities. This group represented 24% of the survey population. Interestingly, 42% of people in this group did not self-identify as having a disability.

- **Users "somewhat likely" to benefit from the use of AT.** Consumers in this category indicated that they experience "some difficulty" with at least one function when engaging in daily activities. This group represented 46% of the survey population.

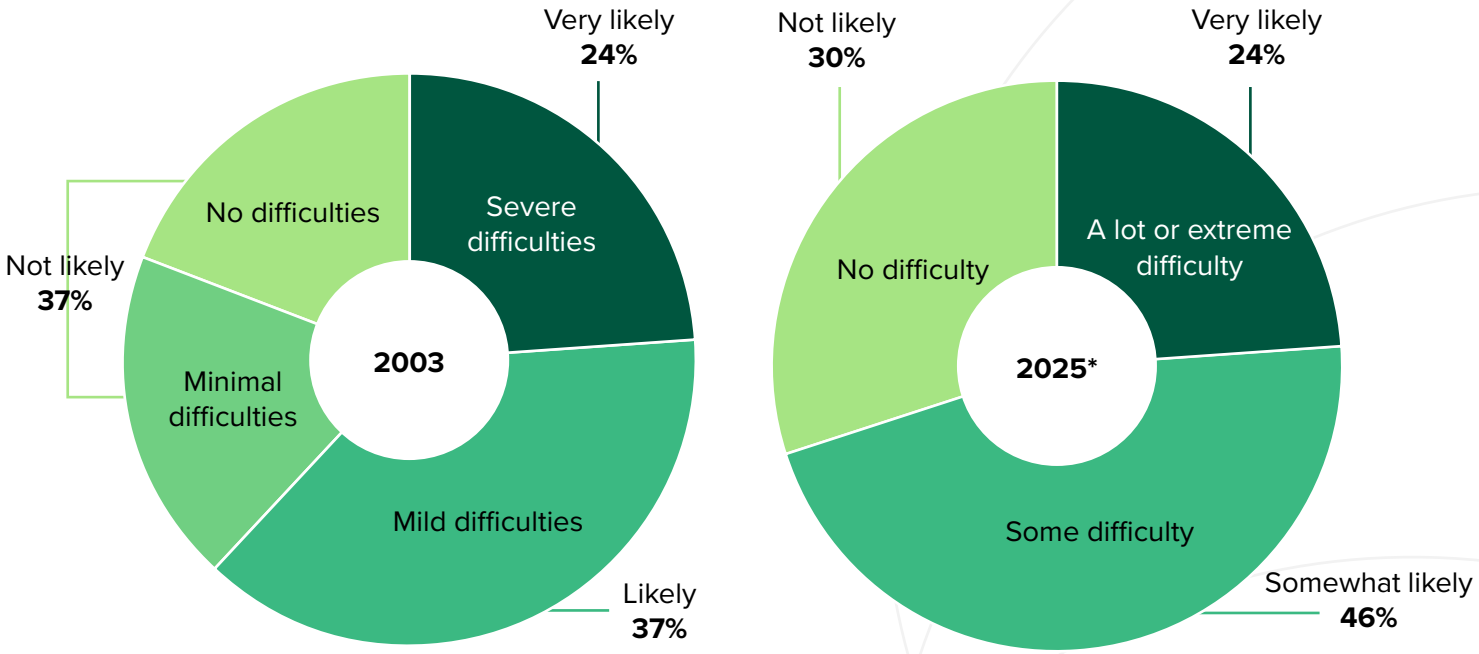
- **Users “not likely” to benefit from the use of AT.** Consumers in this category indicated that they experience “no difficulty” for any function when engaging in daily activities. This group represented 30% of the survey population.

Based on these three categories, we found that more people are likely to benefit from the use of assistive technology today compared to 22 years ago (see Figure 2). Surprisingly, 62% of people without recognized disabilities still reported some difficulty with certain tasks and were thus somewhat or highly likely to benefit from assistive technology. This confirms the wide-reaching potential impact of assistive tools for all users.

This study examined several areas of difficulty or disability, including vision, hearing, learning/cognition, mobility, mental health, and neurodiversity. Interestingly, respondents with vision and mental health difficulties were the most likely to benefit from assistive tools. The percentage of the population with vision difficulties categorized as “somewhat likely” to benefit from AT rose from 27% in 2003 to 42% in 2025, which is not surprising given how much we rely on visual-centric devices today, such as smartphones and tablets, compared to back then.[3] Difficulties stemming from mental health, recognized more broadly as a disability now than in 2003, affect 42% of consumers in 2025, reflecting growing awareness and the expanding impact of assistive technology to new areas.[4]

FIGURE 2

Incidence Of Difficulties With Common Functions And Likelihood Of Benefiting From Assistive Technology Use



Note: Percentages may not total due to rounding.
Base: 15,477 US adults age 18 and older
Source: A study commissioned by Microsoft, conducted by Forrester Research, Inc., 2003
*Base: 2,980 US consumers age 18 and older roughly aligned to general population demographics from the US census
*Source: Forrester's Q2 2025 Accessibility Technology and AI study [E-63649]

Employers' Commitment To Assistive Tools Fosters Employee Loyalty

Assistive technologies are impacting users in both personal/home and work settings. Over 80% of users without a disability reported that they frequently use assistive tools in their personal life, while 91% of those with disabilities said the same. Why? Because these tools simplify routine tasks. Seventy percent said that assistive tools and features make it easier for them to complete basic/routine tasks at home and 44% said the same for complex tasks.

Nearly 70% of respondents who were currently employed reported that they frequently use assistive tools at work. Of those respondents, 40% said that assistive tools and features make it easier for them to complete basic/routine tasks at work; 31% said the same for complex tasks. This suggests that assistive features currently play an important part in contributing to workers' success on the job.

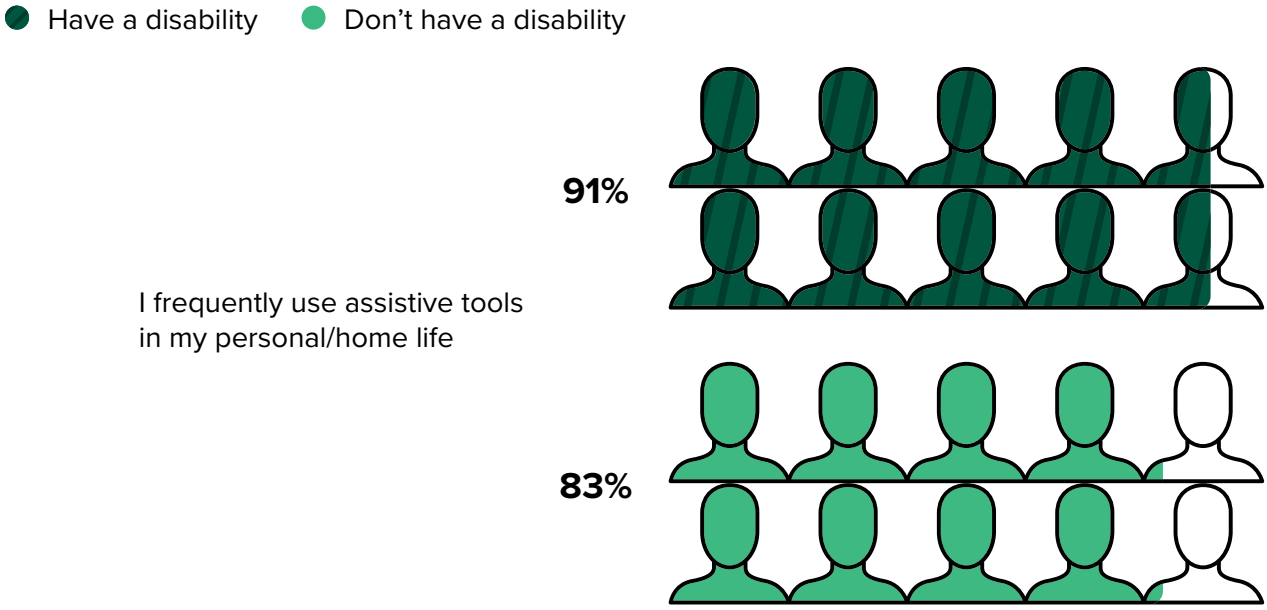
Understanding the value that assistive tools provide in employees' day-to-day task should encourage employers to reevaluate their approach to assistive technology. Currently, the majority of people using assistive tools at work are providing their own tools versus an employer providing them. This is especially true among employees with disabilities: 50% bring their own tools to work, while only 21% use tools provided by their employer (see Figure 3). This is a clear opportunity for employers to do more by way of providing assistive tools, which in turn can impact productivity and job satisfaction. The data support this, as 58% of respondents with disabilities and 52% without disabilities said they feel a strong commitment to a job/employer when they invest and put priority on assistive tools and features.

55%

of respondents felt a strong commitment to a job/employer when they invest and put priority on assistive tools and features.

FIGURE 3

“Where are consumers using assistive tools?”



Base: 3,010 US consumers aligned roughly to general population demographics from the US census
*Base: 2,555 US consumers who are currently employed
Source: Forrester's Q2 2025 Accessibility Technology and AI study [E-63649]

The Value Of Using Assistive Tools Is Multifaceted

This study has shown how assistive features make it easier for users to execute routine and sometimes complex tasks at home and work. On top of these tangible outcomes, there are several nontangible benefits experienced by using these tools, particularly among those with disabilities. Our survey found that using assistive technology (see Figure 4):

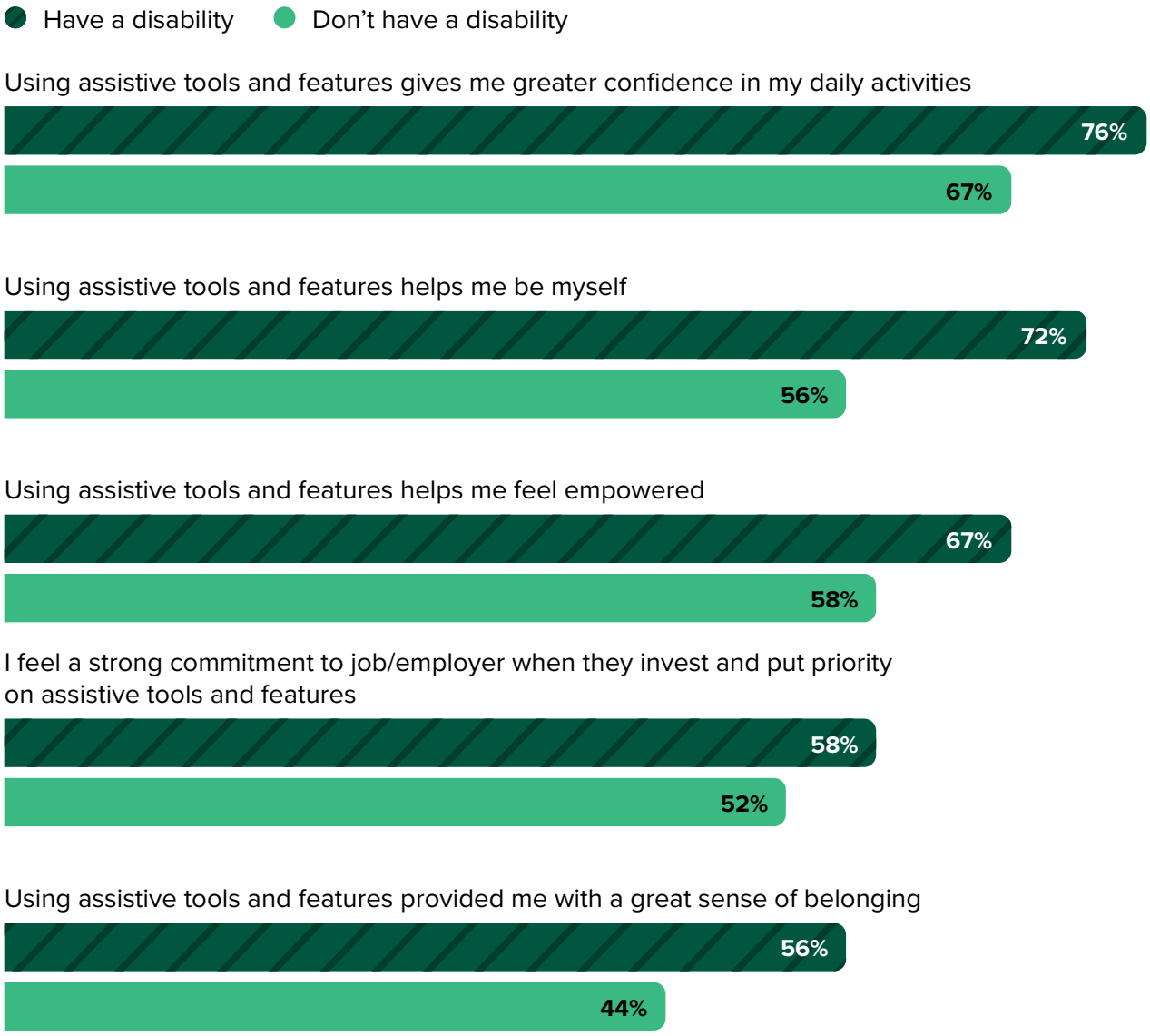
- Gives users greater confidence in their daily activities. (67% of users without disabilities agree; 76% of those with disabilities).
- Helps users be themselves (56% of users without disabilities agree; 72% of those with disabilities).
- Helps users feel empowered (58% of users without disabilities agree; 67% of those with disabilities).
- Provides users with a greater sense of belonging (44% of users without disabilities agree; 56% of those with disabilities).

Assistive tools matter in ways beyond the specific tasks they are supporting. Not feeling limited by difficulties in completing personal or work task instills confidence and can help consumers be proud of the things they do, whether simple or complex.

FIGURE 4

Benefits Of Using Assistive Tools

(Showing “Agree” and “Strongly agree”)



Base: 3,010 US consumers aligned roughly to general population demographics from the US census
Source: Forrester's Q2 2025 Accessibility Technology and AI study [E-63649]

Technology Providers Should Engage With Disabled Users More To Drive Improvements

While AT benefits all users, those most likely to benefit from AT (i.e., those with disabilities or high difficulties with certain tasks) are more prone to recognize the advantages — or gaps — of existing capabilities. While most users (79%) agree that assistive tools are much better now than they used to be, there are still many opportunities for improvement. For example, among consumers with disabilities, there is strong agreement that ongoing improvements and changes are still needed to make experience with these tools and features even better. Our study found the following:

78% agreed that simple changes to process and/or tools could make a big difference in improving accessibility.

61% agreed that they would use assistive tools and features more if they worked better.

46% agreed that technology providers are not putting enough attention into assistive tools

By focusing improvements on this core group of users, there will be a spillover effect that benefits all users. Building tools to address the most complex scenarios will allow them to be adopted to match any degree of difficulty or disability.

AI Advances Can Make Assistive Tools Even Better

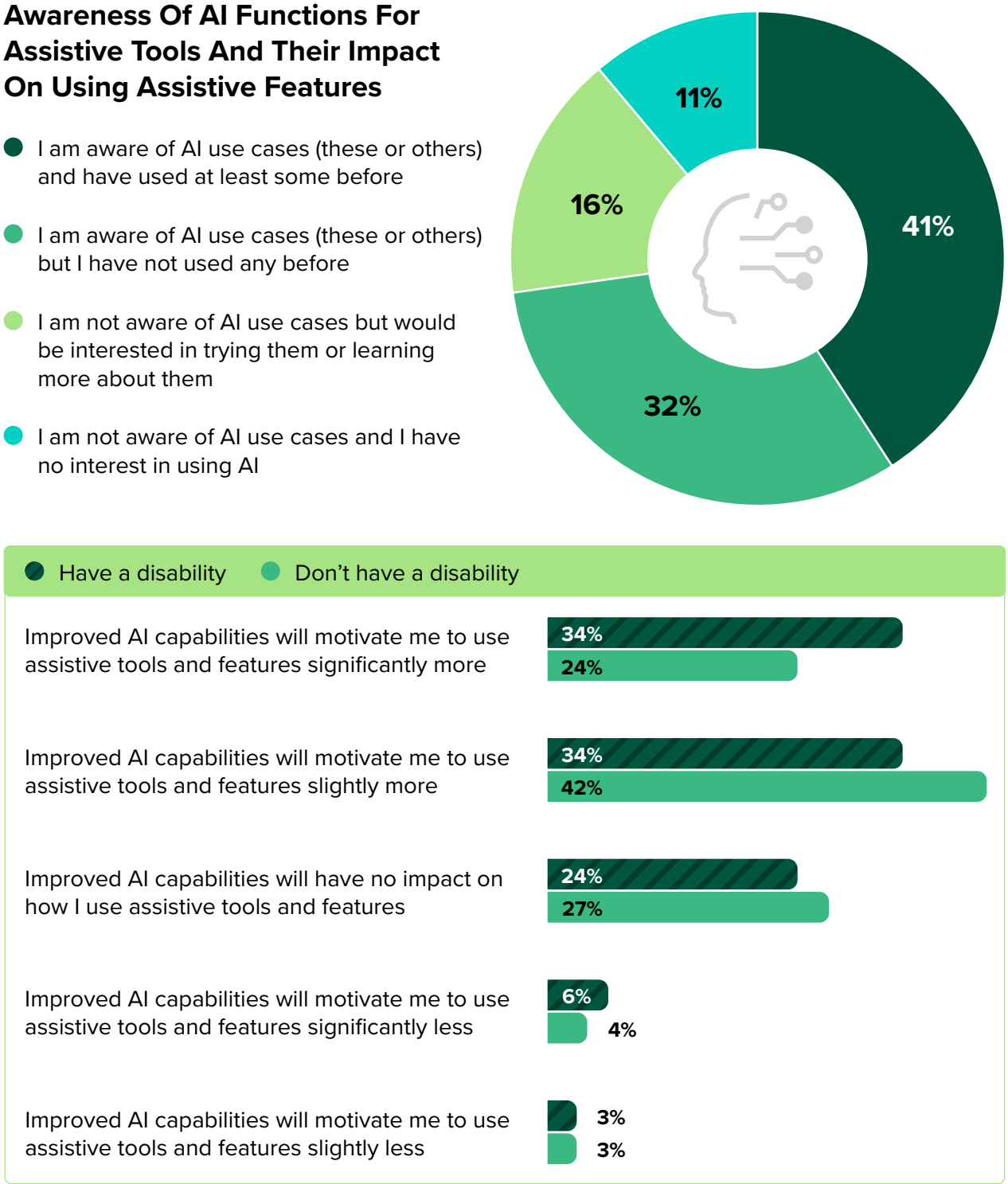
The newest wave of technology that will shape the next two decades of progress with assistive tools is AI. Among other uses, one potential use case for AI to augment assistive features is to allow for more consistent customization and personalization (i.e., tailoring specific settings, views, and activities to match individual needs or preferences) for better ease of use and more effective outcomes. Over time, it is likely AI tools will be able to learn and understand a consumers' specific needs more directly and suggest or automatically connect them to solutions optimized for the tasks at hand, interacting in a natural way based on individual preferences.

Most consumers (73%) are aware of potential use cases for AI, but only 41% report having used it before (see Figure 5). This is a missed opportunity to accelerate assistive tools' successes: When AI tools are able to enhance the use of assistive tools in the ways highlighted above, the majority of all surveyed consumers (66%) said they would be motivated to use assistive tools more often; among users with disabilities, 34% would use features significantly more. The potential promise in combining AI with AT is immense and likely to see significant growth as AI capabilities continue to improve.

Motivation to adopt AI features will largely be driven by the extent to which AI tools help users better navigate their disability and work more independently and efficiently. While these motivations are universal for all users, those with disabilities are more influenced by capabilities that help them manage their disability (see Figure 6). As AI tools are better able to enhance AT's ability to alleviate challenges associated with various sensory or mental health difficulties, they will continue to empower users and deliver value to all users of assistive technology — especially those with disabilities.

FIGURE 5

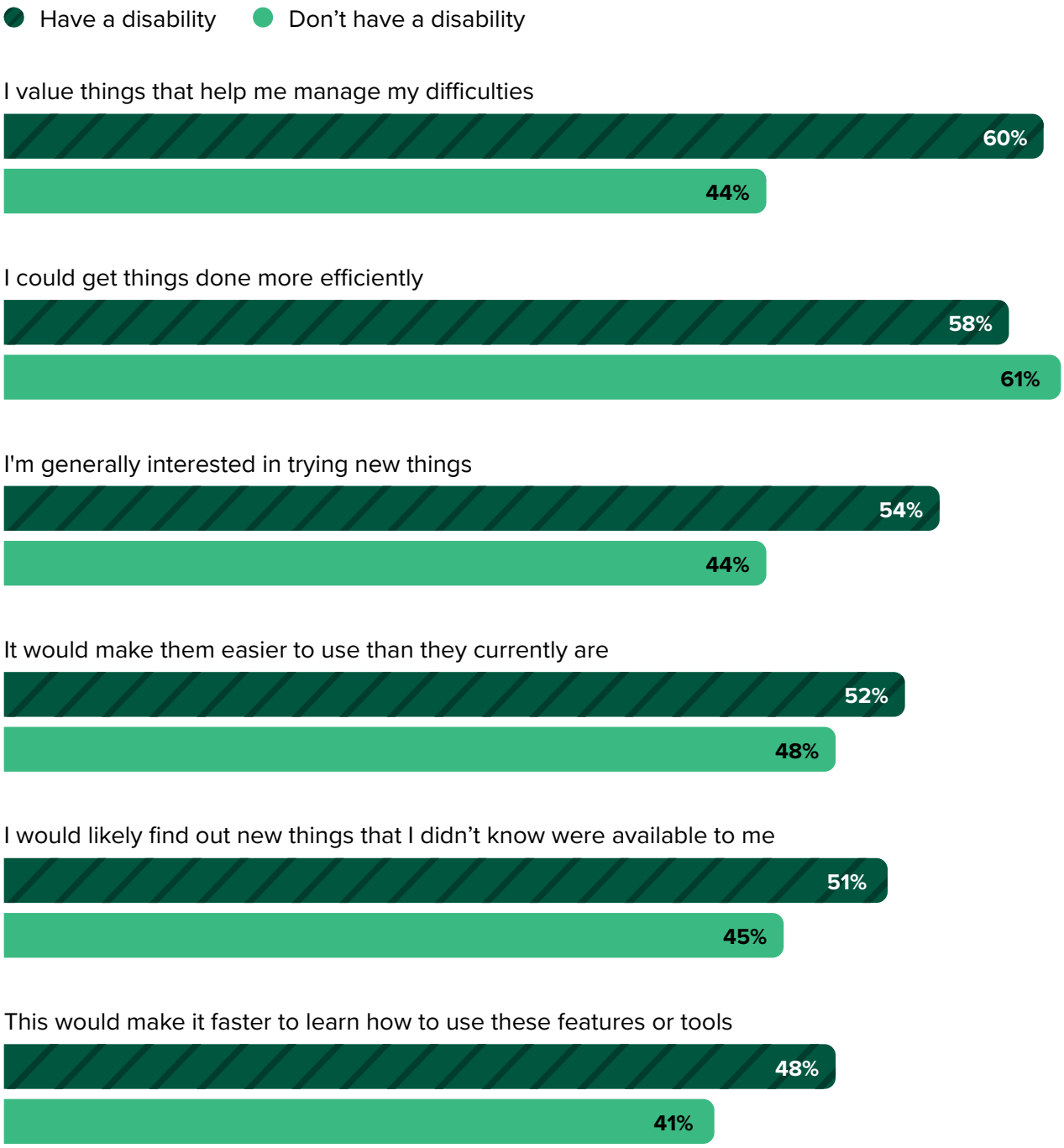
Awareness Of AI Functions For Assistive Tools And Their Impact On Using Assistive Features



Base: 3,901 US consumers including quotas for respondents with specific disability types
Source: Forrester's Q2 2025 Accessibility Technology and AI study [E-63649]

FIGURE 6

“Which benefits explain why you think you are more likely to use assistive tools and features more if AI capabilities improve?”



Base: 2,593 consumers who are more likely to use assistive tools due to AI capabilities
Source: Forrester's Q2 2025 Accessibility Technology and AI study [E-63649]

Summary And Recommendations

The world has changed tremendously since 2003, but one thing has not: People — when enabled by technology to accomplish what's important to them — do so with more confidence, increased effectiveness, and a sense of their own potential for the future. This new study confirms that assistive technology has progressed significantly, and has even more room to improve the lives of those with or without formally identified disabilities.

Forrester's analysis of these study results yielded several important recommendations for vendors and providers looking to better support a wide range of customer needs:

Engage with your primary audience — people with disabilities have ideas about what would help them most. People with disabilities actively use assistive tech and have valuable insights on how to improve it. Vendors, workplaces, assistive technology providers, and advocates should encourage firsthand knowledge and develop roadmaps to help people get even more effective use of their modern tools.

Trust in the spillover effect of things you do for those with disabilities. A remarkable number of people who use assistive technology today don't identify as disabled; they use these tools frequently and reported they help them in everyday life. This pattern suggests that anything done to expand the capacity of those with disabilities will continue to serve at least an equal number of people who recognize difficulties they have in one or more areas as well as those who do not.

Explore ways to make better use of assistive tools in the workplace. Workplaces are underinvesting in accessibility to their own detriment. People are motivated to use the technologies that help them succeed but data shows that their workplaces are either not aware of or not taking responsibility for improving their people's effectiveness at work via assistive tools. The downside they experience of not realizing that their people could be more empowered at work is largely invisible to them today, creating a missed opportunity.

Begin AI tool development with accessibility in mind. Most AI tools lack multimodal input options, limiting usability. There is an opportunity to design tools from the beginning with diverse user needs in mind to ensure better adaptability and user experience.

Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 3,901 consumers in the United States, asking about their daily activities and use of assistive features in the technology they use. Most of the respondents (N=3,010) came from a general population sample; the other portion (N=891) consists of consumers with specific disabilities to understand assistive technology's impact and value across all levels of ability. Respondent's demographics roughly matched US Census distributions for age, gender, region, and income, making the results representative of the adult US population. Respondents were offered a small incentive as a thank-you for time spent on the survey. The study began in May 2025 and was completed in June 2025.

This survey was a follow-up to a study conducted in 2003 by Forrester Research on behalf of Microsoft. That study is referenced throughout this report and included a nationwide survey in May 2003 through July 2003 among US working-age adults. The survey was conducted by phone and mail, yielding a total of 15,477 respondents.

Appendix B: Demographics

AGE	
18 to 24	**14%**
25 to 34	**21%**
35 to 44	**26%**
45 to 54	**15%**
55 to 64	**14%**
65+	**9%**

INCOME	
Less than $25,000	**17%**
$25,000 to $49,999	**22%**
$50,000 to $69,999	**18%**
$70,000 to $99,999	**17%**
$100,000 to $149,999	**14%**
$150,000 or more	**10%**

EMPLOYEMENT STATUS	
Full-time	**51%**
Part-time	**14%**
Contractual	**1%**
Unemployed, looking for work	**12%**
Unemployed, not looking for work	**4%**
Retired	**11%**
Not able to work	**5%**
Other	**2%**

GENDER	
Male	**47%**
Female	**52%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Appendix B: Demographics (cont.)

MARITAL STATUS	
Single	**45%**
Married	**39%**
Divorced	**10%**
Widowed	**3%**
Separated	**2%**

US REGION	
Northeast	**17%**
Midwest	**21%**
South	**39%**
West	**23%**

TYPE OF DISABILITY	
Mental health disability	**46%**
Neurodivergent	**33%**
Mobility/dexterity disability	**32%**
Visual disability	**23%**
Cognition/learning disability	**21%**
Hearing disability	**17%**
Speech disability	**7%**
Other	**7%**

HOME LOCATION	
Urban	**32%**
Suburban	**50%**
Rural	**17%**

DISABILITY STATUS	
GENERAL POPULATION	
Yes, I have a disability	**23%**
No, I do not have a disability but have had one in the past	**4%**
No, I do not have a disability	**71%**
Prefer not to say	**2%**
OVERALL SAMPLE WITH FORCED QUOTAS FOR SPECIFIC DISABILITIES	
Yes, I have a disability	**37%**
No, I do not have a disability but have had one in the past	**6%**
No, I do not have a disability	**55%**
Prefer not to say	**1%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Appendix D: Endnotes

[1] Source: The Wide Range of Abilities and its Impact on Computer Technology, Forrester Research, Inc., 2003.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.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