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BARRIER-FREE IN CUSTOMER SERVICE

With the rapid development of society, in the context of great wars and armed conflicts around the world, the awareness, understanding and promotion of the resolution of problems faced by people with disabilities and citizens with limited mobility in general, aimed at their reintegration into the existing social space, is seen as a foundation for building a human-centred society. Since Ukraine is currently experiencing a terrible and bloody chapter in its history, the number of people with disabilities is increasing, the processes of urbanization are deepening and the population is "aging", the demand for barrier-free solutions is naturally growing. All of this serves as a catalyst for building an inclusive, harmonious society of equal opportunities, respecting the rights and dignity of each of its members. In such a society, no citizen should feel vulnerability and inferiority even at the level of meeting their basic needs, which brings forth new standards for barrier-free service for consumers. The research is based on the hypothesis that, despite the existing prerequisites for creating a barrier-free environment in Ukraine, there are still a significant number of gaps and barriers

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БЕЗБАР'ЄРНІСТЬ В ОБСЛУГОВУВАННІ СПОЖИВАЧІВ

За бурхливого розвитку суспільства, в умовах великих воєн та збройних конфліктів по всьому світу усвідомлення, розуміння та сприяння вирішенню проблем людей з інвалідністю та маломобільних громадян в цілому з метою їх реінтеграції в існуючий суспільний простір розглядається як фундамент для побудови людиноцентричного суспільства. Оскільки Україна нині переживає жахливу і криваву сторінку своєї історії, збільшується чисельність людей з інвалідністю, поглиблюються процеси урбанізації та відбувається "старіння" населення, законо-мірно зростає запит на безбар'єрні рішення. Все це є каталізатором побудови інклюзивного гармонійного суспільства рівних можливостей з дотриманням прав і гідності кожного його члена. В такому суспільстві жоден громадянин не повинен відчувати вразливість та неповноцінність вже на рівні задоволення своїх базових потреб, що актуалізує нові стандарти безбар'єрного обслуговування споживачів. Дослідження ґрунтується на гіпотезі, що, попри наявні передумови формування безбар'єрного середовища в Україні, в сфері організації безбар'єрного обслуговування



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in the organization of barrier-free consumer services, the overcoming of which requires a synergistic approach from government bodies, business structures, and society as a whole. The working hypothesis has been tested using research methods such as abstraction, causal analysis, systemic-structural analysis, comparative analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, field research, systematization and generalization, as well as a dialectical approach to understanding processes and phenomena. The barrier-free consumer service system includes 4 levels of barrier-free access: physical, informational, digital, and educational. In order to form an understanding of the state of development of barrier-free customer service, a diagnosis of leading retail and fast-food enterprises in Ukraine has been carried out, according to the results of which the compliance with accessibility requirements for service and the unused reserves of an inclusive approach to customer service was outlined. The flagship projects of the studied enterprises aimed at creating an accessible service space have been systematized. Recommendations for improving the barrier-free customer service on the basis of collaboration between the state, business and society are substantiated.

Keywords: barrier-free environment, accessibility, barrier-free society, inclusive approach, barrier-free service, people with disabilities.

споживачів залишається велика кількість прогалин та бар'єрів, подолання яких потребує синергічного підходу з боку державних органів, бізнес-структур та суспільства загалом. Робочу гіпотезу перевірено з використанням таких методів дослідження, як абстрагування, причинно-наслідковий аналіз, системно-структурний аналіз, порівняльний аналіз, синтез, індукція, дедукція, польове дослідження, систематизація та узагальнення, а також діалектичний підхід до пізнання процесів та явищ. Безбар'єрна система обслуговування споживачів містить 4 рівні безбар'єрності: фізичний, інформаційний, цифровий та освітній. Для формування уявлення про стан розвитку безбар'єрності обслуговування споживачів проведено діагностику провідних підприємств ритейлу та швидкого харчування в Україні, за результатами чого окреслено дотримані вимоги доступності обслуговування та незадіяні резерви інклюзивного підходу до обслуговування споживачів. Систематизовано флагапманські проекти досліджуваних підприємств, спрямовані на створення доступного простору обслуговування. Обґрунтовано рекомендації з підвищення безбар'єрності обслуговування споживачів на засадах співпраці держави, бізнесу та суспільства.

Ключові слова: безбар'єрність, доступність, безбар'єрне суспільство, інклюзивний підхід, безбар'єрне обслуговування, люди з інвалідністю.

JEL Classification: F19, I31, J17, L81.

Introduction

The war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine is a cruel experience for the Ukrainian people in terms of scale and consequences, leaving deep wounds and scars, but at the same time, it forces to rethink life priorities, demonstrating the importance of unity, support, and assistance to all vulnerable groups. The war also reminds us of the value of human life, calling to cherish each person, their rights and freedoms, and to be more sensitive to those who are difficult to treat. In such conditions, the need to organize an inclusive environment becomes particularly important for improving the quality of life and a sense of usefulness for every member of society: older people, civilians and defenders with disabilities, parents with small children, and so on.

Initiated by the First Lady of Ukraine Olena Zelenska, the National Strategy for the creation of a barrier-free environment by 2030 paves the way for Ukrainian society towards European values and is aimed at ensuring accessibility for all population groups. The formulated strategy is a challenge to obsolete conservative management approaches and principles of building a society inherited by Ukraine from its Soviet past, and includes the following components of barrier-free living:

- physical accessibility means overcoming barriers to free movement within residential buildings and outside their boundaries;
- informational accessibility, which involves providing the population with information through all possible means and communication channels, especially concerning people with intellectual disabilities, visual or hearing impairments;
- digital accessibility or the adaptation of all digital channels to the special needs of people, increasing coverage areas and the quality of the internet and communication, improving access to digital services;
- social and civil accessibility aimed at bringing a person out of social isolation through their involvement in public processes, cultural life, etc.;
- educational barrier-free access or ensuring free access to education for every member of society, creating inclusive groups and classes, as well as ensuring that a person acquires knowledge and skills throughout their lifetime;
- economic accessibility aimed at creating demand in society and the labour market for workers with disabilities, older people, and other representatives of low-mobility groups, creating adequate working conditions for them and fostering a humane, value-based, and tolerant attitude in the workplace (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2021, April 14).

Various entities including government agencies, research agencies, professional organizations, as well as domestic and foreign scientists are currently engaged in the multidisciplinary study of accessibility issues in Ukraine.

Currently, the focus of research attention is on the fundamental principles of creating a barrier-free environment for people with disabilities (Kochubei & Levchenko, 2021); the difficulties of integration into society and the psychological problems of people with disabilities (Bezpalko et al., 2009; Bocheliuk & Turubarova, 2011; Hamretskyi et al., 2012); issues of legal protection for individuals with disabilities (Varhuliak, 2021); social services and rehabilitation for people with disabilities (Babych-Kasianenko, 2019; Buk, 2020).

The subject of many scientific studies is social inclusion (Kolupaieva, 2016; Meijer et al., 2003; Mercer & Mercer, 2004; Odovska-Shlakhchych, 2007; Rasskazova, 2012; Scior & Werner, 2015; Zubchenko, 2020). A group of Ukrainian scholars has published a collective monograph – a fundamental scientific work that explores theoretical and practical approaches to implementing inclusion in the Ukrainian educational space and describes the prospects for its further development (Hlavatska et al., 2022).

A separate category of scientific works is dedicated to the organization of interaction with people with special needs, in particular, the elderly people (Viktorova & Roganov, 2019). Regarding the sectoral aspect of the stated problem, one can highlight the organization of service for people with special needs at the enterprises of the hotel and restaurant business (Marshelenko & Kropyva, 2019; Milashovska et al., 2023), the creation of barrier-free service

environments in tourism (Barna & Tuchkovska, 2020), and the design of office spaces for people with functional impairments (Poliakova et al., 2021). Despite the fact that the issue of barrier-free accessibility and the creation of accessible environments has been addressed by many researchers, the diagnosis of the state of barrier-free service for consumers in Ukraine is a new and insufficiently researched area.

The purpose of the article is to identify key trends that accelerate the development of barrier-free service in Ukraine, to describe the structure of the barrier-free consumer service system, to assess the actual state of service accessibility, and to justify recommendations for its improvement in areas with live consumer service.

Based on previous research, a working hypothesis of the scientific article has been formulated – despite the established and obvious prerequisites for the formation of an accessible environment in Ukraine, there remains a significant number of gaps and barriers in the organization of barrier-free consumer services, the overcoming of which requires a synergistic approach from government agencies, business structures, and society as a whole.

The information base of the research consisted of scientific works of foreign and domestic researchers on the issue of accessibility, analytical reviews from international organizations (*World Bank Group, International Organization for Migration*), reports and official data from domestic authorities and organization (*Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, Ministry of Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine, Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, State Statistics Service of Ukraine, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, Human Rights Ombudsman of Ukraine*).

The working hypothesis was tested using research methods such as abstraction, cause-and-effect analysis, systemic-structural analysis, comparative analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, field research, systematization and generalization, as well as a dialectical approach to understanding processes and phenomena.

Considering the purpose of the article, the formulated hypothesis, research methods, the results of the main part of the article are presented in four consecutive sections: global trends and key drivers of the formation of a barrier-free environment in Ukraine; the constituent levels and parameters of building a barrier-free consumer service system; the overall profile of the application of a barrier-free consumer service system in Ukraine; accelerating changes in the field of barrier-free access: the synergy of the state, business, and society.

1. Global trends and key drivers of creating a barrier-free environment in Ukraine

In a global sense, a barrier-free society is not only low thresholds and wide doors; it is a society of equal opportunities, where barriers, obstacles,

and limitations are overcome by seeking new conditions that allow citizens to feel respect and concern for their capabilities, to become necessary and full-fledged members of the social system. A barrier-free society is an absolute norm for a legal state, where each individual is the highest value, and the government does everything possible and impossible for a high quality of life.

Increased attention to the issue of accessibility is currently explained by several reasons.

Trend 1. Over the past five years prior to the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation, the number of people with disabilities remained stable at 2.7 million annually, which accounted for about 6.6% of the total population of Ukraine. However, today Ukrainian society is experiencing a new terrible wartime experience, thus, these figures are updated daily to reflect an increase in the number of people with functional and mental impairments. Thus, in the first 18 months of the war, the number of people with disabilities rose to 7.4% of the population, amounting to about 3 million citizens. Injuries sustained by military personnel and civilians may lead to devastating long-term physical and psychological complications and disabilities in the future. As of November 2023, the estimated number of Ukrainians who have undergone limb amputations since the beginning of the invasion is at least 20 000 people. Additionally, around 20% of families of internally displaced persons have at least one family member with a disability. (World Bank, 2024, February).

However, difficulties in independent movement or spatial orientation, receiving services or necessary information are experienced by a significantly larger number of people classified as belonging to low-mobility groups. These include persons with disabilities, people with temporary health impairments, older people, pregnant women, and individuals with small children and baby strollers (Ministry of Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine, 2018).

Figure 1 presents the overall structure of low-mobility groups of the population in Ukraine. As of now, the share of low-mobility groups in Ukraine is about 50% (Human Rights Ombudsman of Ukraine, 2024; International Organization for Migration, 2024, April; Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2023, December; Opendatobot, 2024).

Trend 2. The next argument in favour of creating a barrier-free society is military conflicts. They cause not only terrible upheavals and suffering similar to what the Ukrainian people are currently experiencing due to Russian aggression, but also consequences that will be felt for a long time after the war, measured by the large number of wounded veterans and civilians with temporary or permanent health impairments that require infrastructure adaptation to their specific needs. Ukrainian heroes deserve to live with dignity in conditions of equality with other members of society, as well as need psychological and physical rehabilitation and essential reintegration into Ukrainian society after the horrors of war.

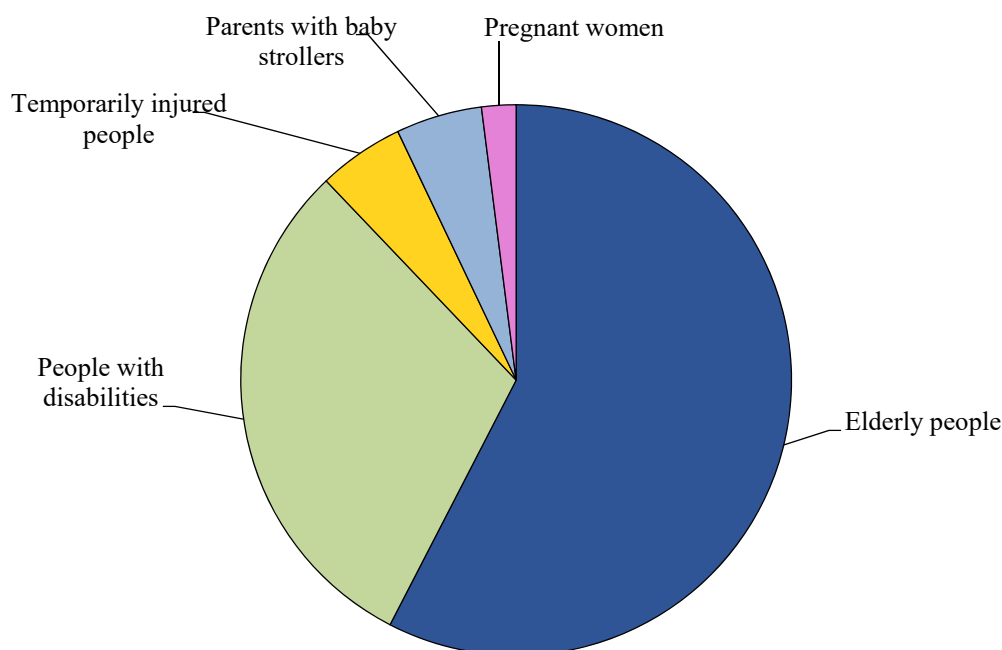


Figure 1. Structure of low-mobility groups in Ukraine

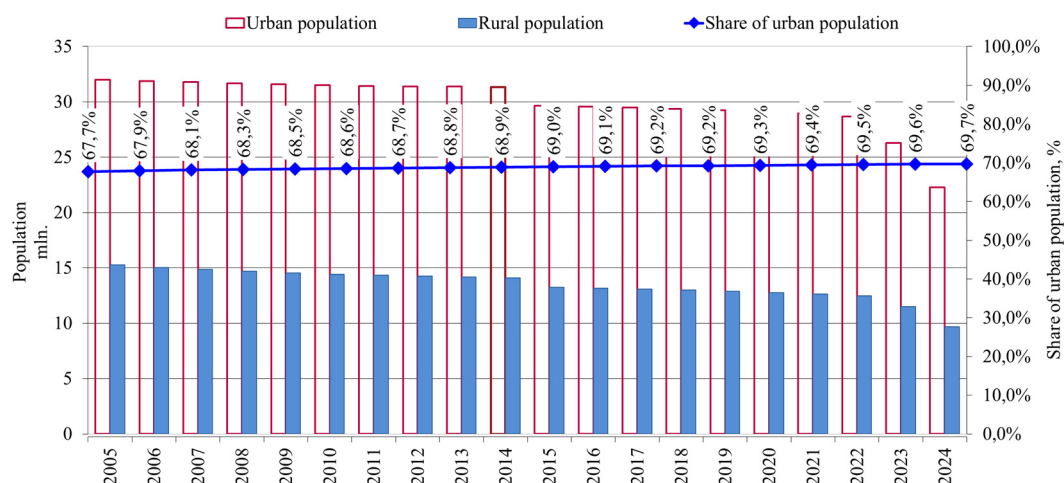
Source: developed by the authors based on (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2023, October; Human Rights Ombudsman of Ukraine, 2024; Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2023, December; Opendatabot, 2024, January 31).

Trend 3. The ethical-legal aspect of the issue of accessibility lies in the obligations that Ukraine undertook by ratifying the Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms on July 17, 1997, which came into force on September 11, 1997 (United Nations, 1950), and by ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on December 16, 2009, which came into force on March 6, 2010 (United Nations, 2006). Furthermore, Ukraine has clearly defined and follows the path of European values, among which accessibility standards are unconditional and obligatory for application.

In addition to the ratified international conventions, a whole pool of regulatory acts has been issued in Ukraine (Law of Ukraine No 875-XII, 1991, March 21; Law of Ukraine No 2961-IV, 2005, October 6; Law of Ukraine No 2671-VIII, 2019, January 17; Law of Ukraine No 2109-III, 2000, November 16; Law of Ukraine No 1324-VII, 2014, June 5; Barrier-free, 2021), which regulate the status of persons with disabilities and contribute to the creation of an inclusive environment in the country. This also obliges active actions already now.

Trend 4. The next factor in favour of accessibility and barrier-free standards is that despite the difficult conditions of war, the processes of urbanization continue to deepen in Ukraine. The results of the analysis of the population ratio by residence indicate an unchanged trend of increasing the share of the urban population (from 67.7% in 2005 to 69.7% in 2022) (State

Statistics Service of Ukraine, n. d. a) (Figure 2). Under the current difficult wartime conditions, citizens are striving for cities, as they provide better socio-economic conditions, more employment opportunities, more convenient infrastructure, access to a wide range of services, and centres for assistance and support for the population.



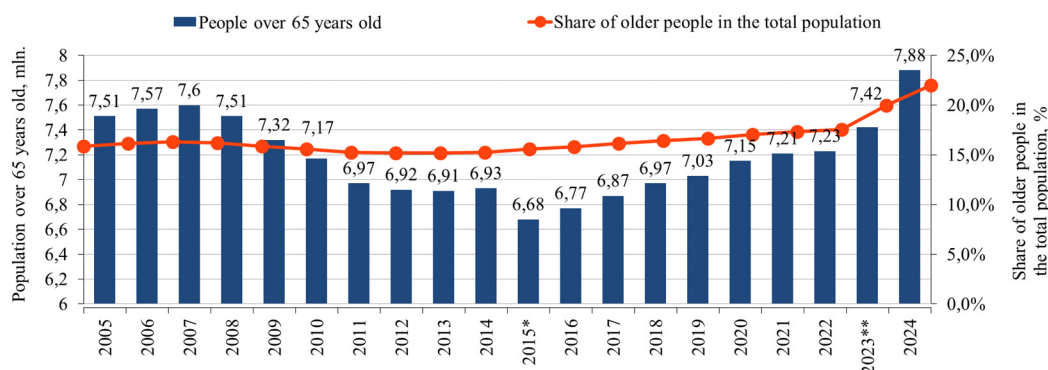
*since 2015, accounting has been carried out without the temporarily occupied territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol

Figure 2. Ratio of the population of Ukraine by place of residence

Source: developed by the authors based on (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, n. d. a).

Trend 5. One of the modern global processes is population aging. According to the *World Bank Group*, with the average global percentage of older people at 10%, in 2023, countries such as Monaco (36%), Japan (30%), Finland, and Italy (each 24%) became the leaders in the research race (World Bank Group, 2023). And this is not the limit, as many international research organizations predict that by 2050, the proportion of elderly people will inevitably increase, especially in the "oldest" region of Europe, due to the rise in life expectancy, the development of healthcare systems, improvement in living conditions, declining birth rates, and a decrease in the share of young population on the planet.

Regarding the analysis of the population structure of Ukraine, a stable trend of "aging" of the population in country has been observed since 2011 (Figure 3). In the future, the situation will only worsen due to the difficult wartime realities and the increase in mortality of the working-age population during the war, which causes demographic decline and a reduction in the share of youth in the overall demographic structure, leading to a significant wave of emigration, primarily of working-age youth, against the background of the reluctance of the older generation of Ukrainians to change their place of residence due to their low mobility. All of this results in an increasing relative share of older individuals in Ukraine.



*Since 2015, accounting has been carried out without the temporarily occupied territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.

**Forecast from World Bank Group (2023).

Figure 3. Share of older people in Ukraine

Source: developed by the authors based on (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, n. d., b; World Bank Group, 2023).

Trend 6. The trends of increasing technological advancement and digital transformation of social processes open up new horizons for creating a barrier-free society in Ukraine. Elevators, ramps, parapets, call buttons – these are just the 'tip of the iceberg' of the opportunities that must be provided for people with limited mobility in the system of design, construction, reconstruction and smart adaptation of architectural structures, premises, and transport to the requirements of accessibility, convenience, information, and safety for citizens.

Despite the war, Ukraine has made significant progress in the development of digital services. For example, from 2018 to 2023, the workforce in the Ukrainian IT sector increased by 78.4%, ranking second in Central and Eastern Europe by this indicator (*InVenture, October 2024*). According to a study on digital literacy in Ukraine in 2023, nearly 94% of respondents have internet access at home (an 8% improvement over the past 5 years). 38% of the adult population has acquired advanced digital skills, with nearly 100% of people with hearing impairments (who accounted for one fifth of respondents in the survey) possessing digital skills, and 90% of people with hearing impairments use the internet daily. Over the past 5 years, even among the elderly population, the proportion of those with digital skills has surged from 53.3% up to 82.6% (they mostly use online banking, online services, receive information from websites/mobile apps, etc.). (Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, 2023).

In addition, in Ukraine, there is an opportunity to significantly simplify the process of obtaining administrative services through the "Diia" platform thanks to digital documents and online services, and through the educational web platform "Diia.Education", Ukrainians can engage in self-education. Participation in the "Digital Europe" program provides Ukraine access to modern technologies, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence, and the recent introduction of a new section "Diia.Accessibility" on the

"Diia" portal allows access to information about government services for people with disabilities, elderly individuals, and other representatives of low-mobility groups.

2. Component levels and parameters for building a barrier-free consumer service system

The presented spectrum of trends and drivers is a powerful driving force for the development and integration of barrier-free principles into the socio-economic processes of the country, aimed at ensuring social integration, equal access to services, and improving the quality of life for Ukrainians, including people with limited mobility. This issue is particularly relevant in the context of the modern concept of consumer service, as building a barrier-free service system is not just a way to create an inclusive environment, but also an investment in the social and economic development of the country by expanding the accessibility of goods and services and reaching more categories of the population with services.

In general, customer service is considered by us as a set of measures and tools for interaction with direct buyers during the sale of goods and services, aimed at meeting their needs and expectations.

Considering the philosophy of barrier-free interaction (Public Organization "Barrier-Free", 2024), during the process of interacting with other people, it is important to be "on the same wavelength" with those around us, sensing their real and latent needs, fears, pains, and discomforts. Therefore, barrier-free service must prioritize providing service to all social groups regardless of their age, gender, health status, disability, family status, religious beliefs, place of residence, property status, etc. It is important to create such an inclusive space, which will comprehensively provide wide access to goods, services, and information, develop alternative communication channels, including digital ones, for people with various limitations, especially for citizens with low-mobility. Barrier-free service should become an environment for the comfortable receipt of services by any consumer without feelings of stigmatization and discrimination.

Figure 4 displays the structure of the barrier-free consumer service system. Each level of barrier-free service is equally important, as it completes the overall architecture of the entire structure.

The level of physical accessibility guarantees unobstructed access to all physical facilities needed by consumers, facilitating their full participation in life, social integration, and improving the quality of life. Ensuring the overcoming of physical obstacles and barriers is not just a result of compliance with legislative norms, but also an important marker of the social responsibility of society, business, and government bodies. Physical accessibility of services is implemented in the following way:

- ensuring the entrance and exit access to service areas – a gentle entrance (level with the ground without porch and thresholds), equipping entrances and exits with ramps with appropriate slopes, elevators, lifting devices, comfortable stairs with handrails;

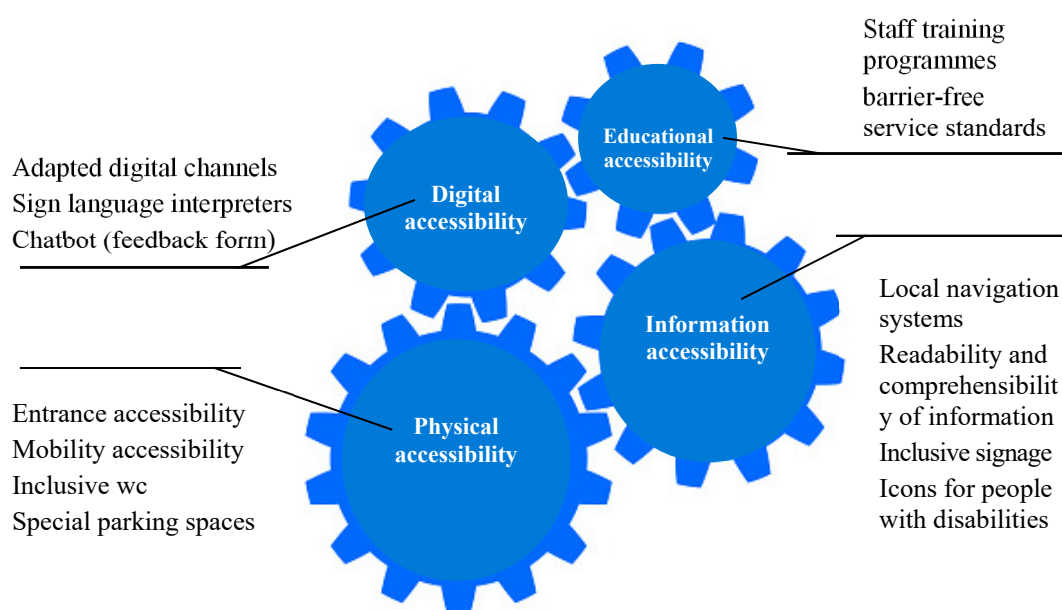


Figure 4. Structure of a barrier-free customer service system

Source: developed by the authors.

- the presence of automatic doors and wide doorways;
- spacious wide passages that allow for movement in wheelchairs;
- the low level of information stands, counters, and service cash registers;
- regulation of the cash passage width of no less than 1 meter;
- the presence of tactile accessibility elements on the floor for people with visual impairments;
- safe lighting of the territory;
- the provision of bathrooms with handrails, low sinks, and space for manoeuvrability;
- special equipment for parking spaces for persons with disabilities, their location close to entrances (at least 10% of all spaces);
- the presence of possible recreation areas for older people or pregnant women.

The previous standards of architecture and design of old buildings and structures mostly did not take into account the needs of certain categories of the population, such as people with limited mobility. Therefore, it is appropriate to develop solutions for their reasonable adaptation to new standards, refurbishment, reconstruction, and, if necessary, further modifications.

The level of information accessibility of services deserves special attention, as today information is the foundation of any information society. The level of information accessibility implies the ability to obtain the necessary information about goods, services, conditions, and rules of their sale, the clarity and adequacy of information for all population groups,

including persons with disabilities, elderly people, and other vulnerable categories. Information accessibility is reduced to the following parameters:

- well-visible, clear, and located in accessible places informational signs and displays;
- visualized icons for people with disabilities;
- the staff call button (or staff support) is provided;
- the presence of a user-friendly local navigation system with its duplication in audio format;
- providing information in different languages to serve consumers of various nationalities;
- contrast markings designed for people with visual impairments, text formatted in large print, the presence of tactile indicators, including Braille;
- for consumers with hearing impairments – the possibility of providing information in sign language (in video materials – support of sign language interpreters).

Information accessibility enables every consumer to make an informed choice, to navigate the conditions of receiving services or purchasing products, and to defend their consumer rights. Moreover, information accessibility is closely linked to the next level of accessibility – digital accessibility.

Digital accessibility is an imperative of the current digital era. It comes down to ensuring equal access for all people to information and communication technologies, including individuals with disabilities and everyone facing various types of barriers in using digital technologies, products, and services. Digital accessibility is characterized by the following parameters:

- availability of adapted digital communication channels;
- ensuring access to the internet in regions with poor infrastructure;
- compatibility of web content with assistive technologies: devices for reading Braille or text-to-speech programs (screen readers);
- websites and mobile applications that meet the *WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines)* standards, including adaptation for use with screen readers and ensuring color contrast, with integration of text scaling features, etc.;
- availability of chatbot or feedback form for consumer support requests;
- access to consultation centres or hotlines that are ready to answer questions from various consumers;
- the possibility of receiving consultations through text services, video services, or sign language.

Digital accessibility ensures equal opportunities in education, employment, service access, and participation in the social and cultural life of citizens. In today's digital society, it is not only a matter of human rights but also an indicator of technological progress and social responsibility of business.

The path to digital accessibility paves the way for the next level of barrier-free service – *educational accessibility* or ensuring equal access to education for all people, regardless of their physical, psychological, cognitive, social, cultural, or other characteristics. In this regard, the following important measures are implemented when providing services:

- conducting training sessions, seminars, webinars, workshops on accessibility;
- possibility of individual approach or support for consumers who need personal attention and assistance;
- training of contact personnel for servicing people with special needs;
- training consumers, especially older individuals, in working with digital technologies, technically complex goods, devices, etc.

Thus, educational accessibility creates conditions under which every individual, whether a consumer or a worker in a service-providing enterprise, has equal opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills related to the barrier-free approach. Overall, an effective model for providing services to consumers can be formed by the harmonious integration of all four levels of barrier-free service.

3. General profile of the application of the barrier-free consumer service system in Ukraine

Nowadays, Ukrainian society is facing unprecedented challenges, and the struggle continues not only on the front line but also beyond it. In such conditions, one of the strategic tasks is the modernization of the "rear" in accordance with the standards of modern global and European practices, aiming to create a society of wide opportunities, equal access to infrastructure and services, as well as forming an unobstructed living space for all citizens. To adequately respond to the challenges of today, the consumer service process must meet the requirements of operational efficiency, flexibility, innovation capability, and technological advancement.

Against the backdrop of the urgent need to solve the issue of accessibility in Ukraine and a whole range of prerequisites that are forcing the development of barrier-free services, a particular interest lies in the diagnosis of leading retail and fast food enterprises that currently operate in Ukraine and are providers (operators) of live customer service.

A number of enterprises have been selected for the study, which actually occupy leadership positions in the relative segments of the Ukrainian market, mostly have a network for servicing consumers all over Ukraine and a stable development dynamic, despite the difficult conditions of war. Since each enterprise has its own history and 'age' of building barrier-free services, *Table 1* presents the results of their achievements in this area as of April 2025. Currently, among the studied enterprises, LLC "ATB-MARKET", LLC "SILPO-FOOD", LLC "FTD-RETAIL", and the McDonald's chain are

official participants in the "Business Without Barriers" community, which consists of a total of 21 Ukrainian and international companies.

Table 1

The results of monitoring the status of barrier-free service at Ukraine's enterprises

№ ord.	Indicators of accessibility	LLC "ATB-MARKET" (ATB network)	LLC "SILPO-FOOD" (SILPO network)	LLC "FOODCOM" (networks)	LLC "Rechi" (chain Red Market)	LLC "Epicenter K"	LLC "FTD-RETAIL" (Fox trot network)	LLC "ECO" (ECO market network)	LLC "INDITEX UKRAINE" (ZARA chain of stores)	McDonald's network	Salateira network
<i>1. Physical accessibility</i>											
1	Gentle entrance without a porch and thresholds	–	–	+	–	+	–	+	–	+	+
2	Ramps with appropriate slopes	+	+	–	–	–	–	+	–	–	–
3	Automatic entrance doors	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
4	Wide corridors and openings	+	+	+	–	+	+	+	+	+	+
5	Barrier-free elevators and lifts	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	+	+
6	Elevator buttons equipped with tactile markings	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	+	–
7	Tactile strips for people with visual impairments	+	–	–	–	–	–	+	–	+	–
8	The minimum width of the cash passage is 1 meter.	–	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	–
9	Low level of information stands, service counters, counters.	+	+	+	–	+	+	+	–	+	–
10	Inclusive bathrooms	+	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	+	+
11	Specially equipped parking spaces for people with disabilities	+	+	+	–	+	+	+	–	+	+
<i>2. Information accessibility</i>											
12	Readable information indicators and stands located in accessible places	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
13	Visual icons for people with disabilities	+	+	–	–	+	–	–	–	+	+
14	Staff call button (or staff support)	+	+	–	+	+	–	–	–	+	–
15	Local navigation system with its duplication in audio format	+	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	+	–
16	Contrasting markings and tactile indicators, including Braille.	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	+	–
17	The possibility of obtaining information in sign language	–	–	–	–	–	+	–	–	–	–
<i>3. Digital accessibility</i>											
18	The availability of adapted digital communication channels	+	+	–	–	+	+	+	+	+	–
19	The use of contrasting colours and clear large font	+	+	–	–	–	+	+	–	+	–
20	The website and mobile application meet WCAG standards.	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
21	The video materials include sign language interpreter support.	–	–	–	–	–	+	–	–	–	–
22	There is a chatbot, a feedback form, or a hotline for consumer support inquiries.	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	–	+	+
23	The possibility of receiving consultations via video services or sign language.	–	–	–	–	–	+	–	–	–	–
<i>4. Educational accessibility</i>											
24	Conducting training on accessibility	+	+	+	–	–	+	+	+	+	–
25	The possibility of an individual approach or support for consumers who need personal attention and assistance	–	+	–	–	–	+	+	–	+	–
26	Training of contact personnel for servicing people with special needs	–	+	–	–	–	+	+	–	+	–
27	Training consumers to work with digital technologies, technically complex goods, devices	–	–	–	–	+	+	–	–	+	–

Source: developed by the authors based on survey results.

The results of the diagnostic assessment of barrier-free service at the surveyed enterprises confirm the hypothesis of a significant number of reserves in the process of building a barrier-free consumer service space in Ukraine. However, no enterprise has achieved a 100% barrier-free service mode. The best situation is at the two-story *McDonald's* restaurant, which was recently opened after reconstruction and re-equipment in Kyiv at Vokzalna Square. All new restaurants in the network are designed taking into account the needs of people with limited mobility. But even this fast-food chain does not provide barrier-free service to consumers in all of its establishments. The worst service adapted for people with limited mobility is provided by the retail chain of everyday household products "Red Market", which is logically explained by the chosen economy format of the *ONE DOLLAR STORE* segment, which is oriented towards a leadership strategy in operational and logistical costs and implies minimal investments in any innovations and inclusive solutions.

A large number of enterprises are only beginning complex reconstruction and adaptive activities within the framework of physical accessibility, as previously construction was carried out according to outdated state building regulations that did not sufficiently take into account modern accessibility requirements. The positive aspect is that all the surveyed enterprises have engaged in reasonable adaptation of facilities for serving consumers and the adjacent areas by installing ramps, elevators, tactile strips for visually impaired people, and specially designated parking spaces for people with disabilities, which is not a particularly complicated or costly task. All other criteria for physical accessibility require more complex design and engineering solutions, but are an architectural necessity for transitioning to an inclusive service space. For example, LLC 'ATB-Market', being a patriotic and socially responsible Ukrainian business, is currently undergoing modernization of many stores in the retail chain based on the principles of barrier-free access, but there still remains a significant portion of unadapted stores, especially those located in multi-storey buildings, which is hindered by the difficulties of redesigning and reconstructing new objects (installation of barrier-free elevators, wide passes, manoeuvring space, etc.).

Information accessibility in enterprises regarding readability, comprehensibility, and visualization of information is mostly ensured. The situation is more complicated when it comes to conveying messages to visually impaired and hearing-impaired people: communication in sign language has only been established at the Foxtrot network, and the duplication of at least some consumer information in Braille is only available at *McDonald's*, which also utilizes innovative ordering technologies for individuals with visual or auditory impairments in the form of informational touch screens with a user-friendly interface. Overall, it cannot be said that information accessibility, which allows consumers to make informed decisions regarding the choice of a particular product or service and to protect their consumer rights, is ensured according to the needs of all requiring.

The situation with digital accessibility is interesting. The vast majority of enterprises have chatbots, online consultants, and hotlines to support consumers, but they are designed only for people without certain functional impairments. Enterprises actively use digital channels to communicate with consumers, which are not fully adapted to meet the special needs of many of them. Indeed, contrasting colours are used, and there is the possibility to adjust the zoom level of web pages, but only through browser settings. The websites, social media pages, messenger channels, and mobile applications of all enterprises do not meet the *WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines)* standards, lacking integration of text scaling features, adaptation for colour contrast, and compatibility with screen readers. In the best case, consumers with certain visual impairments will have to use *Microsoft Edge* and *Google Chrome* browsers, which have built-in "Read Aloud" or "Speech" functions that read the entire webpage or its parts, and can also read electronic books and documents aloud. Digital channels lack compatibility of web content with assistive technologies, such as Braille reading devices or sign language interpreter support. The opportunity to receive consultations in sign language is only provided by the network of electronics and household appliances stores, Foxtrot.

However, businesses that find opportunities to adapt their digital services for people with limited mobility at least demonstrate responsibility towards society and respect for all categories of consumers, as well as contribute to creating their positive image and increasing consumer loyalty. Moreover, improving digital accessibility of services accelerates the economic development of the business by attracting a broader audience of consumers.

An important component of barrier-free service is ensuring the development of competencies for contact personnel in overcoming natural or artificial barriers that may create inconveniences for consumers when receiving services. According to the research results, educational barrier-free services are best implemented in some enterprises: LLC "FTD-RETAIL", LLC "SILPO-FOOD", LLC "ATB-MARKET", LLC "ECO", LLC "Epicenter K", *McDonald's*. For example, the Foxtrot network has organized an educational cycle (in the format of trainings, webinars, online courses, testing, role-playing games) for employees on customer service issues for individuals with special needs, including sign language. In addition, their training continues in the workplace for each specific case of providing services to people with hearing impairments to scale this innovation throughout the network. The service standards include training staff to serve people with special needs and teaching an individual approach to consumers who require personal assistance, especially in matters of mastering new digital technologies and the rules for using technically complex products.

Thus, the retail and restaurant service sector is a fertile ground for the implementation of modern solutions and inclusive projects, through which businesses reflect on current development trends and respond to urgent challenges and issues of today. *Table 2* summarizes the most interesting inclusive initiatives and flagship projects of recent years in the field of consumer service.

Table 2

Flagship projects for creating a barrier-free space for serving consumers

Project name (initiating enterprise)	General description
Barrier-free, Foxtrot (LLC "FTD-RETAIL")	In June 2023, the Foxtrot network, in collaboration with the public organization "Social Unity Public Movement", launched a communication service using sign language interpreters to improve the customer experience both in-store and on the Foxtrot.ua website, as well as to create comfortable conditions for interaction with the store for people with hearing impairments. As part of the project, a separate internet line was provided in the stores, a "hotline" in the contact centre was established for interpreters, and extensive training was conducted among the staff. In addition to video call interpreting services in the store using a tablet with installed software, consumers can scan a QR code in the "Sign Language Translator" mobile app and consult with a store expert with the support of an interpreter. In order to ensure free access for deaf people to receive consultations and the opportunity to shop online, the company's website has implemented a specialized web widget called "Ear" (<i>Connect Web</i>) – for simultaneous communication with a contact center operator and a translator. As part of the project in 2024, the company introduced an electronic identity card for deaf people into the loyalty program – <i>DEAF ID</i> . As part of the project to expand the target audience of the Foxtrot network, subtitles in sign language have also been added to advertising videos.
Equal opportunities, (LLC "SILPO- FOOD")	At the beginning of 2021, the retail chain SILPO, in partnership with the non-governmental organization "Dostupno.UA", launched a project to ensure the accessibility of all existing supermarkets, designing and constructing new stores in accordance with the requirements of barrier-free environment and inclusive building standards. The social project aims to improve various aspects of interaction with employees with disabilities and guests belonging to low-mobility groups, including people with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women, and people with small children, among others. Educational programs have been implemented for staff to assist guests with special needs, and scenarios for an individual approach to serving each subcategory of guests have been developed, especially those requiring special assistance from store personnel. The scenarios begin with the visual identification of different categories of people with disabilities, passing information to the shift administrator and a specially trained personal support employee for the new service format regarding the necessary departments for the consumer, to the checkout and exit from the store (without interfering with the customer's personal space). Guests with disabilities can also request free delivery on the condition of placing an online order for goods.
Barrier-free (LLC "ECO")	Starting from the end of 2023, as part of a collaborative project with the public organization "Dostupno.UA", in the updated supermarkets of the ECO market retail chain, the width of the aisles between the product rows has been increased to 1.3 meters for one year, allowing customers with limited mobility to move freely in the store. Contrasting elements have been added to the interior to make them more distinguishable against the general background, thus facilitating navigation for visually impaired individuals. Payment terminals for card transactions have been extended 20 cm forward for the convenience of wheelchair users when making purchases, and automatic entrance doors have been highlighted with contrasting colours to ensure they are easily visible even in cloudy conditions or low lighting. Also, during the implementation of the project, a separate section 'Accessibility' has been created on the website of the retail chain https://ekodostupno.com.ua/ , which contains guidelines for interacting with people with limited mobility. In this section, a separate category is dedicated to the map of inclusive stores in Ukraine, which will be developed in the near future. In addition, LLC 'EKO' actively engages representatives of groups with limited mobility in its work. As of today, the company employs more than 120 workers with disabilities.

Source: developed by the authors based on ("Diia.Business", 2024, January 15; Silpo, September 2023; EKO Market, 2023, December 11; Bayda, August 2024).

Currently, there are no analogues in Ukraine to the flagship project "Barrier-Free Foxtrot", which aims to adapt customer service in the retail network to the needs of people with hearing impairments. During its

implementation, specialized licensed solutions developed by Ukrainian programmers have been introduced, providing real-time sign language translation services – *Connect PRO*, *Connect QR*, and *Connect Web*. Over 1 200 employees of the company have undergone appropriate training to service customers. As of now, this project has been scaled up in 70 stores of the Foxtrot retail network across Ukraine. Consequently, Foxtrot conducts about 200 offline consultations and 100 online consultations in sign language each month and records over 1 000 registrations for the loyalty program *DEAF ID*. The most interesting thing is that this project not only brought the Foxtrot network closer to the consumer, significantly expanding the target audience, but also strengthened the professional and corporate competencies of employees, united the team, and enhanced the staff's sense of belonging to the global transformations in retail. ("Diia.Business", 2024, January 15).

The social project "Equal Opportunities" is focused on European standards of service and the interaction of supermarket staff with guests with disabilities. As part of this project, changes concerned not only physical accessibility to the store and within it but also parking for people with disabilities (currently provided in a third of supermarkets), the establishment of contrast-marked entrance doors (nearly a third of stores), restrooms for people with disabilities (40 stores have them), and special areas for changing children (20 stores have them). As of the end of 2023, the "Silpo" network had over 240 accessible supermarkets, which is more than 80% of the entire retail chain, featuring ground-level entrances from the sidewalk or ramps or elevators (in the case of stairs). Additionally, guests of "Silpo" have the opportunity to make online orders for selected products with home delivery through the website or mobile app. And for the convenience of guests with disabilities who are participants in the "Personal Account" program, a permanent personal offer for free delivery has been created. It should be noted that the "Silpo" network employs about 1 000 employees with disabilities, of which 14% have hearing impairments, 9% have musculoskeletal disorders, and 7% have vision impairments. To improve working conditions, a special sign language mobile application "Sign Language Translator" is used in workplace communications with such individuals, and a separate section with job vacancies across Ukraine for people with disabilities has been created on the silpo.ua website for the employment of new employees (Silpo, 2023, September).

On the ambitious project "Barrier-Free" on International Day of Persons with Disabilities, December 3, 2023, EKO LLC was inspired by a meeting with representatives of the public organization "Accessible.UA", who conducted a training session for its employees on the correct algorithms for interacting and serving people with disabilities and reviewed one of the EKO markets in Kyiv. The wide aisles, presence of ramps, automatic entrance doors, convenient placement of sockets, and tables in the food zone were positively noted. However, many shortcomings were also identified: absence of handrails for the ramps, excessively steep incline of the latter, lack of designated parking spots for people with disabilities, etc. The comments made inspired

the company's management to implement radical transformations on the path to barrier-free solutions at other facilities in the network (EKO Market, 2023, December 11). Eventually, in just one year, the impossible was achieved: a deep renovation of 4 stores was completed – barriers for mobility-impaired consumers, such as thresholds or height differences, were removed, the sales floor was fundamentally redesigned by widening the aisles, automatic doors and the entire glass entrance area were contrasted and highlighted, the slope of the ramp was reduced and tactile tiles were installed, navigation in the sales area was improved, the cash registers were updated, including self-service checkouts, and the interior and exterior spaces of the stores were modernized. About 70% of the retailer's stores are equipped with ramps that make access to the stores easier for people with disabilities, the elderly, parents with strollers, and other mobility-impaired consumer categories. The ambitious plans of LLC 'ECO' include scaling the inclusive renovation to at least 10 more supermarkets in the near future.

These measures comply with state standards of accessibility and recommendations for creating an inclusive environment, which is becoming increasingly important in modern Ukraine. And since retail and fast food businesses are part of the urban infrastructure, they must contribute to the arrangement of an accessible space.

4. Accelerating changes in the field of accessibility: synergy of the state, business, and society

In the context of rapid population aging, the increase in the number of people with disabilities, and generally the share of mobility-impaired citizens, ensuring the accessibility of spaces and services becomes a key challenge and task for the government, business, and society as a whole.

Today, the government is already providing support for the strategy of creating a barrier-free environment in Ukraine (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, April 14, 2021). A large number of legislative initiatives have been developed to advance this strategy, and efforts are ongoing to improve the legal framework regulating the accessibility of physical facilities, transport, healthcare, education, social protection, employment, and more.

Currently, advisory positions have been introduced in Ukraine for the implementation and monitoring of barrier-free solutions – the President's Commissioner for Barrier-Free Issues, Commissioners of City Councils for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, city accessibility committees, etc. It is also important to provide for the positions of consultants, coordinators, trainers, or inclusivity experts in state bodies and commercial organizations whose activities relate to service provision; it is mandatory to involve representatives of various groups of people with limited mobility, servicemen, and veterans as advisors and testers of the implementations under the barrier-free program. Productive cooperation should be established with non-governmental organizations, human rights defenders, psychologists, parents

raising children with disabilities, and both Ukrainian and international experts. An online platform for feedback from citizens regarding accessibility issues must definitely be created.

An important step on the path to a barrier-free society should be the development of national standards for accessibility and inclusion, with their implementation in state policy. The state should also create a supportive environment for such activities, including preferential investment conditions, tax benefits, government grant programs, and financial support for the implementation of accessibility projects. In addition, it is important to establish the exchange of positive barrier-free experiences at both national and international levels in Ukraine. It is advisable to conduct inspections of the compliance of public spaces, transport, and services with various levels and standards of accessibility on a regular basis, not only by the State Inspection of Architecture and Urban Planning of Ukraine but also by non-governmental organizations that should protect the rights and interests of the most vulnerable groups of people. Furthermore, it is currently relevant to equip shelters that meet the accessibility requirements for all population groups.

We consider it necessary to add to the conditions for the issuance of permits and licenses a requirement for business entities regarding the mandatory availability of accessibility conditions for people with limited physical abilities to business premises in all types of activities with predominant face-to-face service, in particular, in retail and restaurant services.

Currently, the state web platform "Diia" provides significant assistance in informing people with special needs and in delivering electronic services. In the sections "Diia.Accessibility" and "Diia.Business.Development," there is considerable content devoted to reviewing services, initiatives, analytics, real cases, and success stories. There are also reference and educational materials on the issue of accessibility available for anyone interested. The information on the web platform needs to be constantly updated, creating motivating and inspiring content.

According to research by the public organization "Dostupno.UA", as of now, only 4% of Ukraine's urban infrastructure is fully accessible and comfortable for the population (Dostupno.ua, n. d.). There are several publicly available services to inform people with limited mobility about inclusive zones across Ukraine, including the *Google Maps* geolocation map, the interactive inclusivity map "City Without Borders", and the *DOSTUPNO* mobile app map with colourful markings indicating the level of accessibility of establishments, along with route building to the desired location, chatbots in messengers, and others. However, the speed of their updates is insufficient. In large cities in Ukraine, online maps "Accessible City" have been developed, where all inclusive locations are presented in one place with convenient navigation for users. However, such interactive inclusivity maps need to be developed for every locality.

In complex military realities, an important vector for business development towards meeting the expectations of most consumers should be

socially responsible behaviour of businesses and the establishment of personalized communications with consumers (Biliavska & Mykytenko, 2023). Nowadays, businesses must be human-oriented and inclusive.

Right now, the principles of barrier-free access must be implemented in the development strategy of any enterprise, and services must be adapted to the needs of consumers with various physical and mental disabilities. On this path, numerous obstacles and misunderstandings arise, without awareness of which effective functioning in the service sector is impossible. First of all, there is sometimes a lack of comprehensive understanding of the accessibility of public spaces. Comprehensive accessibility is not just a ramp to a facility, but at least three criteria: a parking spot equipped for people with disabilities, a convenient adjoining area, and the entrance to the building itself – sufficiently wide doors, low or even non-existent thresholds, and so on. In reality, a barrier-free facility may be announced as meeting all internal requirements, but a person with a disability may simply be unable to enter due to inaccessible transport and street infrastructure, improperly designed pedestrian crossings, high curbs, heavy doors, or narrow doorways, and so forth. Or there is the opposite situation, where there is barrier-free access but there are no minimal facilities for a person with limited mobility.

If we analyse the current situation in the retail and fast food sectors, the difficulties in organizing barrier-free spaces are often related to leasing premises in shopping centres where the basic parameters of barrier-free access (entrances-exits, elevators, lifts, etc.) are not well thought out. In addition, it is not always possible to identify an accessible service establishment from the street, as there is a lack of relevant information or pictograms on the outside.

It is advisable to consider the possibility of setting up rest rooms for consumers in stores, which is very relevant for people with mental disorders, including war veterans and civilians affected by war, who can quickly become sensory overloaded in public places and therefore need solitude and silence for psychological recovery. Also, in areas with predominantly live service, a good solution for convenient checkout service could be self-checkout with a lowered height for easier use by people in wheelchairs.

Regarding the information and digital accessibility of consumer services, the websites, social media pages, messaging channels, and mobile applications of all enterprises must comply with the *WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines)* standards, with integrated features for text scaling, adaptation to ensure colour contrast, and the use of screen readers, as well as compatibility with assistive technologies – devices for reading Braille for visually impaired people, programs for sign language communication, or support for sign language interpreters for people with hearing impairments. The content must be simple, easy to perceive and understand, with logical, unobtrusive navigation for all users. Overall, all digital services for consumers should comply with the European standard for digital accessibility *EN 301549*, which has been adopted as a state standard in Ukraine (AccessibleEU, 2021, June 29).

The educational accessibility of modern enterprises also requires improvement at the level of each employee, primarily the contact personnel. Educated employees should not only be able to find an individual approach to each consumer, especially those with special needs, but also develop their empathy, understand the needs of different consumer groups, know the basic principles, correct terminology, and principles of barrier-free service. Moreover, the educational accessibility of personnel should be formed at the enterprise in a constant mode and in a format that combines various modern educational technologies.

In the matter of forming a system of inclusive consumer service, enterprises cannot operate "in a vacuum". Cooperation with public organizations and the implementation of joint projects to improve various levels of service accessibility should be considered a direction of business development under the slogan *must have*.

In the unified information space of each enterprise, there should be information resources that inform consumers about the availability of each of its facilities, the degree of accessibility of various services of the enterprise. It is also important to involve experts in accessibility and opinion leaders who can promote this issue among the public with the possibility of public highlighting of successful practices and initiatives in the field of accessibility.

If we consider the level of society, the attitude towards people with disabilities, those with different functional and mental impairments should be rethought, recognizing their right to receive equal opportunities in various areas of life. The basic principles of a barrier-free society should be instilled in children from a young age, starting with eradicating stereotypes and prejudices against people with disabilities, fostering respect for inclusive values, indifference, and empathy in the younger generation.

All good public initiatives will not be effective if citizens do not take an active part in their implementation. Consumers must respond promptly to various issues related to violations of barrier-free services. They should establish feedback with organizations that can influence the state of solving the accessibility problems for all categories of the population. The synergy of the state, business, and society should manifest itself in joint monitoring and control over the observance of rights and requirements of people with limited mobility. Barrier-free access must become the norm of human life, not an exception to the rules.

Conclusions

Based on analytical reviews and official data from domestic and international organizations, the impact of socio-economic, political-legal, demographic, and scientific-technical factors on solving the issue of barrier-free access in the world has been assessed, and key prerequisites for the accelerated development of barrier-free services in Ukraine have been identified. Among the mentioned prerequisites are: an increase in the share

of low-mobility population groups as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion; legislative and legal initiatives that protect the rights and regulate the status of persons with disabilities; the strengthening of global trends in urbanization and population aging; and the active digital transformation of social processes in the country in recent years.

In this context, the construction of an effective and viable service system that takes into account the requests and needs of a wide range of consumers, including representatives of low-mobility groups of the population, serves as a barometer for the development and maturity of society as a whole. The structure of the barrier-free service system should contain 4 levels: physical, informational, digital, and educational barrier-free accessibility. Only in the aggregate and mutual integration of these components is it possible to achieve high efficiency of the entire barrier-free consumer service system.

Currently in Ukraine, the process of creating an inclusive environment is shifted from the place. This implies from the participation of all studied enterprises in the redesign and reconstruction of existing facilities according to the norms and standards of barrier-free accessibility, with the prospect of scaling barrier-free experiences throughout their functional network. These processes are accompanied by the activation of the development of competencies of their personnel in overcoming a wide range of barriers that create inconveniences for consumers during the service process. At the same time, the informational and digital levels of barrier-free accessibility need improvement, as virtually all evaluated enterprises require adaptation of their informational and digital communication channels to the special needs of consumers. Thus, the results of the conducted research confirmed the hypothesis about the existence of a significant number of gaps in the construction of a barrier-free service environment for consumers in Ukraine, which is explained by the country's position at the initial stage of forming an inclusive environment and requires a synergistic approach from the state, business, and society.

Today, accessibility in service provision is not only a legal necessity and a moral-ethical obligation of the state and society, but also a marker of social responsibility and competitiveness of any business. This highlights the need to activate the collaboration of government bodies, business structures, and the entire society in the context of meeting the needs of all population groups, including consumers with various physical and mental disabilities. The state must create a favourable environment for the implementation of barrier-free solutions in Ukraine, business structures should optimize the inclusive service environment for consumers, and society must become the main "supervisor" of all inclusive initiatives aimed at improving the level of service accessibility in the country. Taking into account the experience of other countries, this process may take decades, but the key impetus has been given, and this is irreversible.

The prospects for further scientific research are related to the study and evaluation of the effectiveness of initiatives involving the state, business, and society aimed at improving the level of consumer service accessibility in Ukraine.

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