

# CPD's Sachin Pavithran To Assume National Leadership Post | CPD Blog

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12/14/2020

Dr. Sachin Pavithran, the CPD's outgoing policy director and the [Utah Assistive Technology Program](#) Director, will soon leave for Washington, DC.

Starting in January 2021, he will be the new US Access Board Executive Director. The board is a leading source on accessible design in the nation and the world. It develops standards for buildings, sidewalks, transit vehicles, telecommunications equipment, medical diagnostic equipment and information technology.

The US Access Board is small, Pavithran said, but it has a large footprint. Its membership includes leadership from a number of federal agencies, as well as public board members from all over the country. "We are unique in a way because most countries don't have anything like that. A lot of countries try to duplicate what we do. We are the gold standard that countries come to... there are always foreign diplomats coming to visit and asking us to go out there to help them when it comes to standards and guidelines." Pavithran himself served on the board after he was appointed by President Obama in 2012.

He has worked at the Center for Persons with Disabilities for 20 years, starting with [WebAIM](#).

"Sachin worked with WebAIM when he was an undergraduate student," said Cyndi Rowland, WebAIM's director. (WebAIM works with industry, government and education to make websites and digital materials accessible to people with disabilities.) "Beyond the work he did for us was the way in which he shared perspectives of being a tech user with a disability. He helped us see important shifts that we needed to make. WebAIM is more relevant for having had Sachin in our early years."

As he studied, worked and assumed leadership roles, both Pavithran and the accessibility movement have grown and changed perspective.

In the 90s, when he was a student, the concept of accessibility was still gaining traction. Assistive technology—the high- and low-tech devices that help people with disabilities gain or maintain independence—was by and large expensive and hard to find. Today, phones, computer software and architecture have some built-in accessibility. Corporations like Apple, Google, Microsoft and Amazon have whole teams working on it, and they are competing with each other in that space, finding ways to do it better. "They realize it's a pretty big market. It's a market that has buying power, this is a market that is getting bigger and bigger because the baby boomer population is getting older, and they're also going to use some of this technology," Pavithran said.

Even so, there is a lot of work to be done before people with disabilities—like Pavithran himself, who is blind—can fully interact in their communities. For example, it is still very hard for him to go to a concert at a large venue, find his seat and then leave it for a little while to find a restroom or buy refreshments without depending on someone else. And still, before he buys a piece of technology, he spends a lot of time researching whether he can actually, physically use it. And the barrier of transportation remains enormous for people with disabilities, limiting where they work and live, and interfering with their interactions in their own communities.

"The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed 30 years ago, and it is a good thing. But there's a lot still to be done to make lives for people with disabilities more inclusive," he said. "People with disabilities have a lot to contribute, but they can't play a key role in all these different sectors unless we do things to level the playing field. To make sure things are being done in a way that people with disabilities can be equal partners in the conversations within a community."

Over his years at Utah State University and the CPD, Pavithran has experienced his own evolution. He came to the US after growing up in Dubai, and he had almost no experience with people with disabilities, other blind people, or using a white cane to get around. “When I came to the CPD I used to go straight to my office, sit at my desk, and do what I needed to do, then go back home. I would not explore around the building, didn’t go meet people, didn’t do anything because I wasn’t confident enough that I could figure it out.”

He learned to overcome his natural shyness, as advocating for himself and other people with disabilities became a priority. Another huge influence was getting involved in the National Federation of the Blind. “I was invited to go to Washington, DC, in early 2007. The Washington seminar and the speakers at the event [were] blind people who held high positions in organizations, whether it’s nonprofit, government, in the public sector, or leading different companies. Attorneys, people working in the White House, people who are successful. And I had no idea there were blind people who were that successful, like absolutely no clue. It changed my perspective... running into hundreds of blind people just doing things and saying, ‘Hey, let’s go to dinner, it’s just three blocks down the street over there.’ How do you do that without someone helping you get to that? It was just as foreign. It was so out of my comfort zone. I just tagged along with those people, and I started telling myself, I need this. I need to be able to do this.”

Since then he has served as an advocate and leader at the national level, not just with the Access Board with also as president of the [Association of University Centers on Disabilities](#). Pavithran has stressed the need to address underserved populations within the disability community.

“It’s a topic that hasn’t been given a lot of attention, because people really didn’t think people who are not the majority race could have a different level of treatment within the disability community,” he said. “It was surprising to the disability population at large, because they thought all disability people were ... piled into the same group. But the reality is, there are a lot of things that still need to be addressed. There’s inequity. When you are a person of color, you still have those prejudices against you that exist in this society. Now, when you tack on disability on top of that, it is just a double-whammy at that point. ... If you look at a lot of the data, unless they live in a community that has a large [minority] percentage of the population, you usually don’t see them getting a lot of services.”

He will now lend his perspective on the national stage, and he’s ready. “Sachin has trained worldwide to large audiences in a number of countries,” said Dr. Marilyn Hammond, who has worked with him for years at the Utah Assistive Technology Program.

“His advice and expertise is sought after by legislators and government officials. Sachin will be sorely missed at the CPD. He truly does make the world a better place for all of us.”