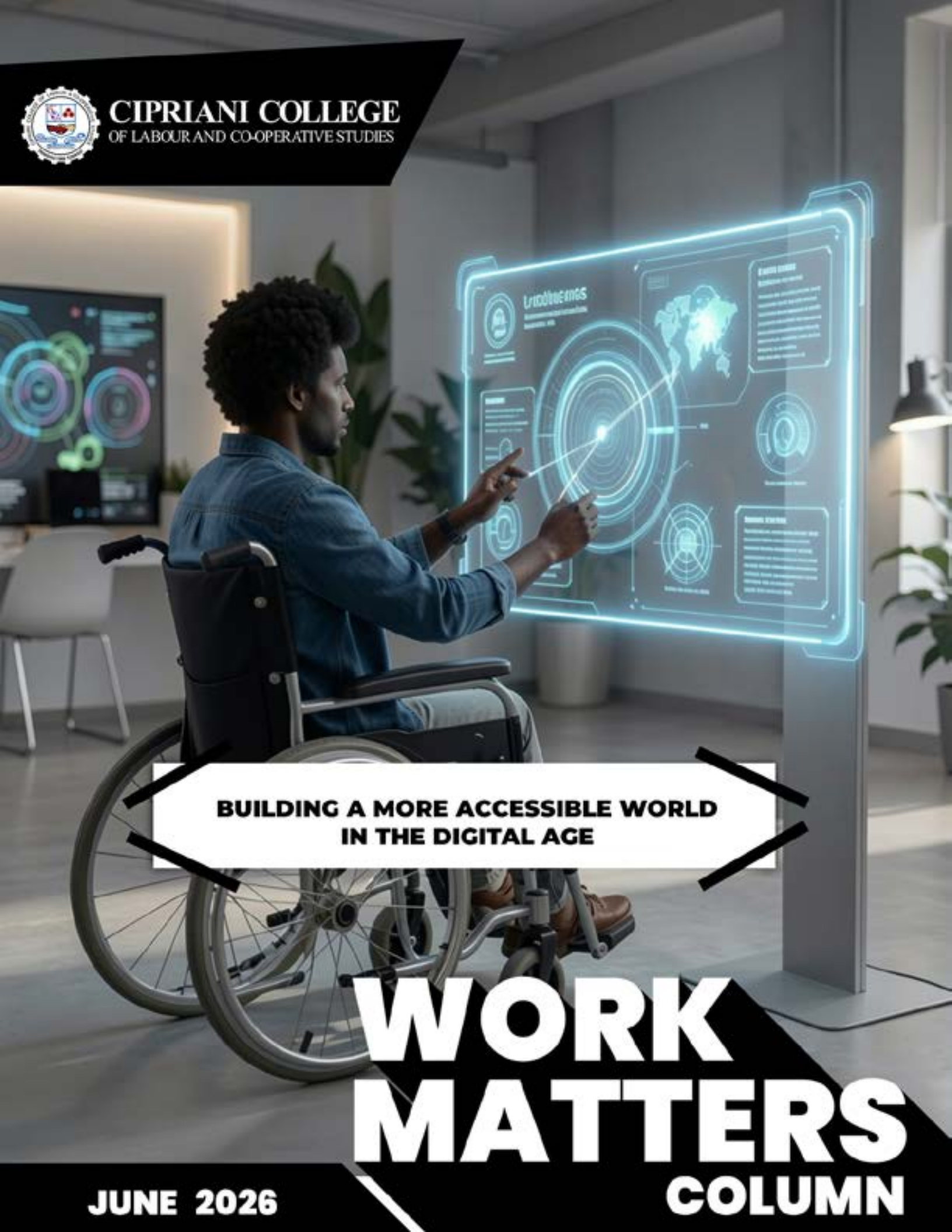

CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

BUILDING A MORE ACCESSIBLE WORLD IN THE DIGITAL AGE

WORK MATTERS COLUMN

JUNE 2026

Building a More Accessible World in the Digital Age

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Creating a more accessible world means designing technology everyone can use. Accessibility is not just a technical feature or a corporate social responsibility checkbox; it is a fundamental human right. Technology has progressed through many stages of innovation and become an essential part of daily life, from education and employment to healthcare and communication. The digital age offers both opportunities and challenges for many disabled people worldwide.

Accessibility can be seen in numerous environmental adaptations such as ramps, tactile paving, and communication tools such as braille. However, as society has become increasingly dependent on technology and online services, the biggest barriers to inclusion have moved from the sidewalk to the screen. The smartphone has changed from a luxury communication tool into an essential assistive device. What makes AI genuinely transformative in this space is not any single feature or application, but its capacity to adapt. The most effective tools meet users where they are. A person with a visual impairment receives a spoken, real-time description of their surroundings; a person with a speech difference gets a voice interface that learns their patterns over time; a person with dyslexia reads text reshaped to fit the way their mind works.

Many tools now serve both disabled users and those who wish to support them. One of the most empathetic examples is Be My Eyes, a mobile application that connects blind and low-vision users with sighted volunteers via live video. When a user needs help reading a label, navigating a space, or completing a task, they open the app and are connected in real time with one of ten million volunteers worldwide. Be My Eyes is a community built around the simple act of looking out for one another. The platform now serves over one million blind and low-vision users globally. In August 2025, Be My Eyes expanded into the elder care and assisted living sector, bringing AI-powered visual assistance and live video support directly into care homes, recognising that over 50% of care home residents globally are blind or have low vision. Yet, the brilliance of Be My Eyes lies in its recent evolution. With the integration of "Be My AI," powered by advanced multimodal models, users no longer have to wait. They can snap a photo and receive a dense, conversational description of their surroundings, effectively giving them a pair of "digital eyes" that are available in any language.

Throughout history, inclusion has too often been experienced as a transaction: a disabled person must identify themselves, declare their limitation, justify their need, and then wait to see whether the institution deems that need legitimate enough to address. It positions access as a favour granted rather than a fundamental human right honoured.

The economics of minority status proves to be a significant barrier. When disabled people represent a statistical minority of users, institutions, whether governments, technology companies, or employers, have historically used that as a reason to justify inaction. The reasoning is rarely stated so plainly, but its logic is familiar: accessibility features require investment; the benefiting population is small; the return on investment is not profitable.

In Trinidad and Tobago, research conducted by Francis and Glasgow (2026) on barriers to employment among people with disabilities highlights systemic barriers that prevent equal participation in employment. The study argues that meaningful inclusion requires changes in laws, education, workplace practices, and public attitudes so that disability is not treated as a disadvantage in accessing work opportunities. Government buildings without reliable wheelchair access, websites that are not compatible with screen readers, and workplaces that fail to provide reasonable

accommodations reflect a wider perception that accessibility is not an urgent priority because the affected population is relatively small. However, the burden of this exclusion is experienced daily by people with disabilities, who are often required to invest additional time, financial resources, and effort simply to access employment opportunities and participate fully in economic and social life. AI provides a new opportunity not by making accessibility cheaper, but by making it unnecessary to treat it as a separate problem in the first place. When a system is built to respond to each person as they are, there is no longer a choice between a "standard" version and an "accessible" version.

Ultimately, the measure of these tools is not their sophistication, but what they restore. Inclusion is no longer about a person with a disability waiting for a kind stranger to offer assistance; it is about being able to engage with the world on one's own terms. The challenge remains to ensure these tools are built with accessibility-first principles, keeping them free or low-cost to prevent a digital divide. We are finally entering a time where the world isn't just designed for the "average" user, but is being dynamically reshaped to fit the needs of everyone. Independence, after all, is not about doing everything alone, it is about having the choice and the tools to navigate life with confidence.