Confronting Accommodations Bias

An accommodation is anything in the environment that reduces the demands of a task relative to an individual's capabilities.

We often think of accommodations only in the context of disability. In reality, accommodations are everywhere. Stairs are an accommodation. Without them, reaching a different floor would require a much more demanding method of access. Accommodations simply make a task easier relative to the abilities of the individual performing it.

Tangibility Bias

The human brain is not designed to process every piece of information. It evolved to favor speed and survival over accuracy. As a result, cognitive biases act as mental shortcuts that make thinking easier, faster, and less effortful.

Humans naturally attend to what they can see and often overlook what is abstract. We call this type of cognitive bias "tangibility bias." Because of this bias, physical disabilities and impairments are generally easier for society to recognize and accept. Cognitive impairments, by contrast, are often misunderstood, stigmatized, or dismissed because the impairment itself cannot be observed directly.

Many tangible accommodations provide executive function support. What is often overlooked is that these accommodations frequently serve as physical attempts to reproduce executive support functions that can also be provided through direct, real-time, oral conversation.

The Cog-Erg Lens

Using the lens of Cognitive Ergonomics From the Inside Out® (Cog-Erg), we can begin to identify, define, and validate many intangible cognitive supports hidden in plain sight. The Cog-Erg lens brings into focus the cognitive supports embedded within direct oral conversation.

These supports assist the process of goal-directed thinking used by individuals every day, often without recognizing them as accommodations. The table below illustrates common executive support functions, along with both their tangible and intangible equivalents.

Executive Function Support Equivalency Table		
Cognitive Support	**Tangible Equivalent**	**Intangible Accommodation (Direct Oral Conversation)**
Preserving Information	Writing notes, lists, journals, whiteboards, recordings	Another person remembers information that you forgot and brings it back into the discussion.
Providing Retrieval Cues	Checklists, cue cards, prompts, reminders, flow charts, decision trees	Another person asks questions or provides prompts that trigger retrieval of knowledge that would not otherwise surface.
Monitoring the Thinking Process	Review checklists, quality-control procedures, written evaluation criteria, audit forms	Another person identifies gaps, contradictions, errors, or assumptions in your thinking.
Holding the Structure of the Discussion	Agendas, outlines, project plans, meeting notes, mind maps	Another person remembers what has been discussed, what remains unresolved, and what sequence should be followed.
Reducing Information Management Demands	Written notes, spreadsheets, diagrams, visual displays, project management software	Another person temporarily holds information so you do not have to maintain everything in working memory simultaneously.
Providing Alternative Access Paths to Knowledge	Reference materials, FAQs, examples, templates, decision guides, knowledge bases	Another person reframes questions, provides examples, or approaches the issue differently to stimulate retrieval.
Maintaining Goal Focus	Written goals, visual reminders, timers, alarms, task lists, project dashboards	Another person redirects attention back to the objective when thinking drifts.
Expanding the Search Space	Brainstorming templates, decision matrices, comparison charts, concept maps	Another person introduces possibilities, considerations, or perspectives that have not yet been considered.
Generating Ideas	Brainstorming templates, mind maps, concept maps, creativity prompts, idea-generation templates, AI prompts, whiteboards used for brainstorming	Another person asks questions, makes observations, draws connections, or introduces perspectives that stimulate new thoughts and possibilities that might not emerge independently.

This table reveals that many tangible accommodations function by externalizing executive support. Direct oral conversation can provide many of these same support functions in real time through another individual.

The question is not whether tangible accommodations are useful. They clearly are. The question is whether tangible accommodations alone can provide all the executive support required by individuals with executive function impairments. The answer is often no.

Executive functions operate dynamically in real time. Information must be retrieved, organized, monitored, evaluated, updated, and redirected as circumstances change. While tangible

accommodations can preserve information and reduce cognitive load, they are inherently They cannot always provide the immediate feedback, cueing, monitoring, retrieval assistance, and adaptive support required during active problem-solving.

Direct oral conversation is different. It can respond to changing conditions as they occur. It can supply real-time executive support precisely when it is needed.

If executive functions are impaired and since executive functions work collectively as intangible processes, it follows that many of the most effective accommodations will also be intangible. Therefore, direct oral conversation should be recognized as a legitimate executive-function accommodation, not merely a form of communication.

If executive functions are intangible, why would we expect all effective executive-function accommodations to be tangible?