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Spain is an undisputed leader in accessibility, not only at the European level but also globally

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Jesús Hernández-Galán
Director of Accessibility and Innovation at the ONCE Foundation

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We spoke with Jesús Hernández-Galán, Director of Accessibility and Innovation at the ONCE Foundation, about the Foundation's role in promoting social entrepreneurship and the need to consider accessibility in any innovative project to foster the inclusion of all people in the technological field.

Improvements in accessibility for people with disabilities or the elderly have evolved in tandem with the integration of new technologies into everyday life. The innovative solutions they develop not only improve their quality of life but also transform societal habits as a whole. Technologies such as audiobooks and voice recognition systems, initially developed for people with disabilities, are now widely adopted, demonstrating that accessibility benefits the entire population.

In this interview, we explore how the ONCE Foundation has contributed to breaking down barriers by promoting solutions focused on accessibility. We discover how the Foundation supports the growth of startups focused on social entrepreneurship. Additionally, we discuss the future of social entrepreneurship and the impact that forthcoming accessibility legislation will have on companies across various sectors.



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Jesús Hernández-Galán

Jesús Hernández-Galán is the Director of Accessibility and Innovation at the ONCE Foundation. With a PhD in engineering, awarded *cum laude*, his professional career has focused on **accessibility**, standing out for his **commitment to innovation and support for the entrepreneurial ecosystem**.

He has led numerous large-scale national and international projects with significant technological impact, driving initiatives for the creation and acceleration of emerging companies, and establishing himself as a reference model in Spanish innovation.

Jesús has a solid academic background, having studied at prestigious institutions such as IESE, Stanford University, and the London School of Economics. Additionally, he serves as Director of the European Accessibility Centre, Vice-President of ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism), and President of Technical Committee 170 at UNE, the Spanish Association for Standardization.

In October, Hernández-Galán received the **National Innovation Award 2024** for his outstanding professional career and leadership in innovation and social and economic transformation in Spain.

“For us, it has been a great honour that the National Innovation Award 2024 has been granted to my professional career. However, it is an achievement for the entire ONCE Social Group”.

For Jesús, this award is a recognition of the collective effort of the ONCE Social Group and highlights the relevance it gains in driving social innovation.

“Now we call it innovation, but we have always referred to it as 'making a living'. For many years, we have been trying to solve urgent problems that are more challenging than those faced by the general public.”.

He hopes that this award will serve as a platform for the daily initiatives and efforts of the Foundation, showing how innovation can address specific problems and improve the quality of life for individuals. In this way, they aim to motivate companies, innovation centres, and research institutions to also think about the social sector.

The contribution of the ONCE Foundation in breaking down barriers and promoting accessibility.

Since its creation, the ONCE Foundation has played a crucial role in **improving the quality of life for individuals**. Jesús tells us that, in its early days, their efforts focused on removing architectural, urban, and transportation barriers. However, with the advancement of technology, the Foundation has adapted and evolved to tackle the new accessibility challenges that arise daily.

A significant example highlighted by Jesús is the transition from mobile phones with keyboards to smartphones with touchscreens. In their early versions, these devices left people with visual disabilities unable to use them due to the lack of auditory information. The Foundation then developed assistive technologies that allowed these individuals to continue communicating effectively.



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The projects we develop, designed for those who face the greatest challenges, improve the quality of life for all citizens; they are not exclusive to people with disabilities or the elderly

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Benefits of innovating in accessibility for society

Jesús emphasizes that innovation in accessibility not only has a positive impact on people with disabilities or the elderly, but also generates significant benefits for society as a whole. By developing accessible solutions, greater inclusion is promoted, making it easier for all citizens to access products and services.

The Director of Accessibility and Innovation highlights two clear examples of these advances: the development of audiobooks and voice recognition systems.

Audiobooks, initially conceived to facilitate access to culture and education for people with visual disabilities, have become a thriving industry. On the other hand, voice recognition systems, which at one point allowed Jesús to write his doctoral thesis, are now being naturally integrated into any operating system and are useful for anyone.

The expert states that the assistive technologies developed by the ONCE Foundation ultimately become democratized and are used by society at large.



The support of the ONCE Foundation to the entrepreneurial ecosystem

Jesús explains that the ONCE Foundation has implemented two key strategies in the field of entrepreneurship: intrapreneurship and support for startups.

Through intrapreneurship, the Foundation develops its own innovative projects aimed at solving specific accessibility issues. A recent example is the collaboration with elevator component manufacturers to allow users to call the lift from their mobile phones, eliminating the need to interact with physical buttons that may be inaccessible for some individuals.

Jesús also mentions the use of 3D printing to enlarge the lollipop stick, enabling people with cerebral palsy to enjoy a lollipop independently, without the risk of choking and without the need for assistance.



Additionally, the ONCE Foundation currently has an intrapreneurship project in the research phase where it uses artificial intelligence (AI) for image recognition, with the aim of facilitating communication for people with hearing disabilities through automatic translation between sign language and spoken language.

On the other hand, the ONCE Foundation is committed to supporting startups through the Servicio de Crecimiento accelerator, aimed at helping these companies grow and develop effective solutions. The Foundation's role in this regard is to analyse the projects to ensure they address real problems, and provide advice to improve the feasibility and focus of the proposed solutions. Additionally, they purchase pilot projects to validate products and services, offering entrepreneurs the opportunity to work with accessibility experts and connect with a broad network of potential clients and social entities.



Sometimes, they are also a bridge to connect entrepreneurs with stakeholders of interest. Jesús mentions that, in some cases, they have encountered the need to connect companies with local councils to implement accessibility solutions in urban development. In other cases, it is necessary to connect with rehabilitation services, such as in the development of exoskeletons.

He also recalls *"an amazing project that has developed a solution in which everything that happens in the classroom is converted into a fully accessible format for the computer, tablet, or mobile of the students, improving their performance"*, which led them to connect this company with universities. He concludes by mentioning participation in ecosystem events such as South Summit, Impact Forum, Tapping Between, and Startup OLÉ, where they bring the companies they accelerate closer to the different agents in the ecosystem.



The best investor for an entrepreneur is the customer. Because they inject money into your business without asking for anything in return, just quality in your product, and they validate the product



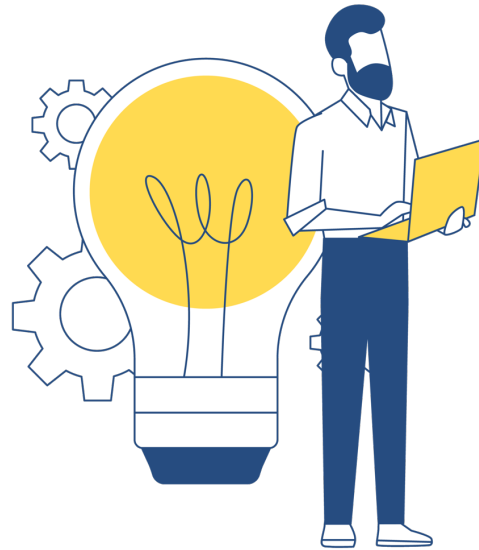
How does accessibility legislation affect startups?

The Director of Accessibility and Innovation highlights that there are significant differences between the countries of the European Union. While Spain leads the way in accessibility, other countries still have a long way to go.

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Jesús warns that the European Accessibility Act (EAA) will come into force in June 2025, a European Union directive that sets minimum accessibility requirements for products and services in the European market. Its aim is to eliminate barriers and facilitate access to these goods for people with disabilities, as well as harmonise accessibility regulations across member states. This legislation seeks to drive innovation and inclusion, enabling companies to offer more accessible and competitive products and services.

This new regulation will affect sectors such as transport, financial services, e-commerce, and emergency services. Products and services will need to meet specific design and functionality requirements to adapt their accessibility for people with disabilities. Jesús offers his help to the companies that will be affected in order to comply with the new regulations: *“From the European Accessibility Centre, we can help all these companies improve accessibility and comply with the legislation”*.

The future of social entrepreneurship

The future of social entrepreneurship faces various challenges and opportunities. Although it is happening less and less, Jesús explains that he has come across cases where social entrepreneurs focused on solving specific problems with great passion and dedication, putting all their *ikigai* or life purpose into the projects, but often did not incorporate a clear business model. This made it extremely difficult to ensure the economic sustainability of their initiatives.

The Director of Accessibility and Innovation points out that it has been a challenge to help entrepreneurs understand the importance of having an economic return to ensure the continuity of their projects.

Additionally, he considers it essential that any type of entrepreneurship takes human diversity into account and develops its products and services with accessible solutions, covering all potential customers from the conception of the idea.

For Jesús, integrating social purpose with economic purpose is crucial to foster an exchange of philosophies and working methodologies between different types of ventures. He believes that this exchange of knowledge and approaches is very enriching for the entire entrepreneurial ecosystem and would allow more projects to be both socially impactful and economically viable.



I believe there should be a transfer of knowledge or approach, both for entrepreneurs who do not have that foundation of social impact, so they truly consider it, and for social entrepreneurs, who should also think about the business model



Tips for entrepreneur

The Director of Accessibility and Innovation believes that any entrepreneurial project should consider four fundamental "pillars": social impact, economic impact, environmental impact, and especially, personal impact.



Let it be a project with heart, one that truly aligns with your purpose, so you can give your best



Jesús advises entrepreneurs focused on social projects to contact Fundación ONCE. *"We can help validate and analyse the project, which can be very useful".*

He also mentions that Fundación ONCE, along with ASEMDIS (Association of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities), organises events such as the Entrepreneurship and Disability Congress in Bilbao, where resources and support are offered to entrepreneurs with disabilities.

The role of public initiatives

For Jesús Hernández-Galán, the creation of the National Entrepreneurship Office (ONE) was necessary to support entrepreneurs and give them a voice. He highlights the importance of having a channel for communication and the transfer of knowledge and best practices within the ecosystem. He underscores that initiatives like Plataforma ONE are essential for strengthening the ecosystem and play a crucial, much-needed role.



Plataforma ONE is playing a much-needed role and is proving to be genuinely useful for the entire entrepreneurial ecosystem





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