

Website accessibility – what it really means, and what you need to do

‘The Power of the web is its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect.’

Tim Berners-Lee, W3C Director and inventor of the WWW

What is web accessibility?

‘90% of FTSE websites fail basic levels of accessibility standards’

Abilitynet (www.abilitynet.org.uk)

Put simply, accessibility means that your website can be viewed and used by everyone.

Yet many, many websites do not allow everyone to access them. Some websites require a specific browser or operating system. Some make it difficult (even impossible) for people with a form of disability to use their website.

There are many reasons for why a website is not accessible:

- The website was built before accessibility guidelines came into place, and may use ‘non-accessible’ code
- Uses a proprietary system which only works on specific browsers or operating systems
- Accessibility may not have been considered as a priority
- Designers inserting too much control over visual display

If a website is not accessible a user may find it difficult to navigate around, or may not even be able to use it at all. A user may be blind or visually impaired and be using a speech reader to ‘read’ the webpage back to them. They may have limited motor skills, and so use the keyboard for navigation rather than a mouse. If a user cannot easily use a website, they will leave quickly with a feeling of irritation be likely to never return.

Why should I bother?

If you have a website you are happy with, and believe works for you, why should you care about accessibility?

The ethical case

A responsible business builds a level of trust and expectation with its customers. This should be extended to all customers, and not just some.

Inclusion not exclusion. If your website includes some people and not others why is that, and how will that reflect on your company and reputation?

A great benefit of the development of websites has been to give users (and customers) a sense of empowerment and independence. People can shop from home, they can make choices and decisions themselves. Giving all your customers this sense of empowerment reflects on you, positively.

A website exists in a space which is far more flexible than a physical building. Many elderly or disabled people find travel and physical access more difficult than others, so a website which is accessible and easy to use is more likely to offer a pleasurable experience, leading to returning customers and word-of-mouth recommendations.

The legal case

The Disability Discrimination Act has been in effect from 1 October 1999, with the latest amendments and changes coming into effect 1 October 2004. The act defends and protects the rights of the minority against that of the majority, and this effects websites as much as it does buildings, packaging, signage etc.

There are some grey areas regarding how a website should behave to adhere to the act, and what needs to be done, but the key elements are:

- Websites should be accessible, and if they are not they are in breach of guidelines

Creative communication design? Things that look good and are easy to use, read, and understand.
How do you do that? Using ideas, typographic design, clear language, and technology.

- Only really applicable to websites covering goods and services, education, charities etc.
- Not applicable to your personal homepage
- There is no defined level or standard of accessibility, only guidance (see the section below)
- No case has yet gone to court in the UK, though the RNIB have taken action against some companies and forced an out of court settlement.

The business case

Making your website accessible is a win/win situation. Disabled or restricted users will be able to access the website, and existing users will not notice any difference. In fact existing users may well benefit from any updates and changes to the site structure, navigation and organization, making the site easier to use.

Just over 10% of the UK population have some form of disability. Opening your website up to all can increase the number of visitors and revenue as well as enhance your businesses reputation.

The number of over 65's using the internet is increasing rapidly, and making the site easier for them to use opens up an extra revenue stream.

Not just people with disabilities who will benefit. The underlying change to the website will allow for direct access via different internet devices, such as mobile phones and PDA's.

The underlying changes to the code will also lead to smaller, leaner pages which means page loading is quicker, and bandwidth is reduced.

What is involved, and how much will it cost?

The guidelines

As mentioned above, the Disability Discrimination Act does not define what web accessibility guidelines a website needs to reach or meet. But the consensus from RNIB and others is:

- WAI (W3C Web Accessibility Initiative) level A is an absolute minimum requirement
- WAI level AA or above is ideal

The WAI guidelines provide information on the how the code behind webpages should be written, so in some respects it only goes so far towards an accessible website.

The code

There are some key changes required to the code behind a webpage. These include:

- Do not use tables for page layout, only for tabular information (as speech readers in particular struggle to understand complex table layouts)
- Build your pages using XHTML and CSS, so that you separate content from layout
- Put ALT attributes on all images, and make them informative
- Mark-up your text in a logical and structured way using h1, h2, h3...
- Define all screen typography in the CSS, and do not use font tags, and allow the text to resize so users can make it bigger or smaller if they need to.

There are many more issues to consider, but these are some of the key issues. Perhaps the biggest change to an existing site, will be the change from a table-based layout to a div based one. In practice this is often not a huge change, and can have benefits for faster page loading and easier updating.

Not just code that is important...

It is important to remember that making a website accessible is not just about the code. Good design and well structured content are crucial factors to ensure legibility, ease of use, and logical navigation.

How much time and resources will it need?

Starting from scratch

If you are just starting out with your website, then making a website accessible adds no time, resources or cost.

Your designers need to know the abilities and limitations of accessible sites. The technical team need to know what the type and format of the code.

Creative communication design? Things that look good and are easy to use, read, and understand.
How do you do that? Using ideas, typographic design, clear language, and technology.

Agreeing these issues first is important, and will benefit you in the long term.

Making your existing website accessible

Taking your existing website and making it accessible can be very easy, or very difficult. It depends on how the site is currently built and maintained, and any restrictions on what can be changed. It is at this stage you need to step back and gauge with all the stakeholders what needs to be done, and how it can be achieved.

External resources

We consider the following websites to offer valuable information on web accessibility (though please note we cannot be responsible for the quality or any changes to the information).

www.disability.gov.uk

www.drc-gb.org

www.abilitynet.org.uk/content/info/dda.htm

www.w3.org/wai

www.rnib.org.uk