



ACCESSIBLE WEB SITE DESIGN

An overview of accessible web design and its benefits

OUT OF THE TREES
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WHAT IS ACCESSIBLE WEB DESIGN?

Put simply, *web accessibility is about designing a site to ensure that its content is available to the maximum number of visitors, including people with disabilities, regardless of the technology they are using.* Accessible sites prioritise content, structure and ease of navigation over frivolous aspects of design; however that doesn't mean they can't look great and utilise the latest technologies.

On a practical level, basic accessibility includes providing alternative text descriptions for people that cannot see or hear, using simple, intuitive site navigation that can be used via a mouse or keyboard, clear labelling and page structure, not relying on javascript, and allowing visitors to change the size of text and page colours.

Accessibility and usability are not the same thing; however, they do overlap in many areas, and web developers who design with accessibility in mind are often able to improve their web site for all users.



ACCESSIBILITY & DISABLED VISITORS

One important group to benefit from accessible design is the disabled community. According to a recent *Harris* poll,¹ nearly half of all people in the US with disabilities report that the Internet has significantly improved their quality of life. Unfortunately, people with disabilities can still find many web sites difficult or even impossible to use simply because of the way they have been designed – even though most accessibility solutions are quite easy to implement.

Good web design takes into account the five main types of disabilities that affect Internet usage:

- **VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS**, which affect over one million people in the UK, such as poor eyesight, blindness and colour-blindness;
- **HEARING IMPAIRMENTS**;
- **MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS**, such as the inability to use hands because of arthritis and tremors;
- **COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENTS**, such as dyslexia (which affects about 4% of the population) and learning difficulties;
- **SEIZURE DISORDERS**, such as epilepsy, which can be triggered by flashing animations.

Sadly companies cannot always justify making their web sites accessible for purely altruistic reasons, so you may want to consider the following points.

¹ *Harris Poll* <http://www.harrisinteractive.com>

ACCESSIBILITY & THE LAW

Most Western governments have introduced anti-discrimination legislation which has implications for the accessibility of web sites. In 1999, the UK's *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* was extended to cover all “Goods, facilities and services provided by businesses” in the UK. Web sites are also covered by the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001*, and by the *Human Rights Act*. Other countries now have similar legislation, for example the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*.

Briefly, this means that if your web site provides a service, you may be liable to legal action if you do not take all reasonable steps to ensure that the service is available to people with disabilities. Also, if inaccessible company web sites or intranets prevent someone from doing their job, they may be entitled to legal action against the company.

Recently the *Sydney Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games* was successfully sued for not making its web site — designed by IBM — accessible. The fact that companies such as the Royal Mail and Tesco have now implemented accessible versions of their web sites shows that businesses are beginning to take accessibility — and the consequences of failing to comply — seriously.

Out of the Trees specialises in ensuring that web sites meet these legal requirements, in accordance with the recommendations of the World Wide Web Consortium's *Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)*.²

² W3C's *Web Accessibility Initiative* <http://www.w3.org/wai/>



BENEFITS OF ACCESSIBILITY

ACCESSIBILITY MAKES COMMERCIAL SENSE

Disabled people are potential customers too. In the UK, 6.7 million people of working age are disabled, and in the US that figure is about 35 million individuals. Can you really afford to ignore 41 million potential customers from those two countries alone? After all, the disabled community in the UK is estimated to possess a spending power of £33 billion.

OTHER BENEFITS OF ACCESSIBLE WEB DESIGN

Accessibility isn't just about catering to disabled visitors though; the web is used by millions of different combinations of people, browsers and computers. Not everyone uses Internet Explorer on a desktop PC running Windows — Apple Macs and Linux are increasing in popularity, as are browsers such as Netscape, Opera and OmniWeb. Additionally, some people are effectively rendered 'disabled' by the technology they are using:

- **PORTABLE DEVICES**, like laptops and PDAs (such as Palm Pilots) will usually have limitations such small screen size and low resolution, or even text-only screens and voice browsers;
- **NOT EVERYONE USES THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY**; for example, libraries, charities and people in developing countries often have to use old computers, out-of-date browsers and slow Internet connections;
- **SEARCH ENGINES** are effectively text-only browsers — an accessible site is more likely to get a good listing in, say, Google.

Remember, an accessible web site can be used by anyone, no matter what technology they're using.



OUT OF THE TREES WEB SITES?

We don't consider accessibility to be optional — it makes obvious sense to ensure your site can be used by the widest possible range of people. Therefore, we build sites to *World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) standards* and UK legal requirements, and incorporate features to ensure that every visitor can access and use your web site.

The Web Accessibility Initiative of the W3C has published a set of guidelines³ which define accessibility, organised into three priority levels. *All sites we design meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines Level-A Conformance* (the minimum required for a site to be considered accessible), and most meet the most-stringent criteria: *Triple A-Conformance*.

If you're looking for a professional web designer, ask the potential candidates about accessibility. If they have no idea of what you're talking about, find someone else. You'd be amazed at how many 'web designers' have no understanding of the underlying principles involved in building a website.

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³ W3C's Accessibility Guidelines <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/>

