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The essential guide to digital accessibility

Learn the fundamentals of making your digital products and services accessible to everyone.

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Digital accessibility means making sure everyone can use your digital products and services, regardless of ability. This includes your websites, apps, electronic documents, and other digital experiences.

It's about designing and building in ways that work for everyone, including people with disabilities—whether those are visual, auditory, motor, verbal, or cognitive. It's also about supporting those who rely on assistive technologies such as screen readers, voice input, or alternative keyboards.

You can use this guide to understand the basics—what digital accessibility means, how people interact with your products, how to evaluate your current state, which regulations apply, and how your organization can build accessibility into everyday practice.

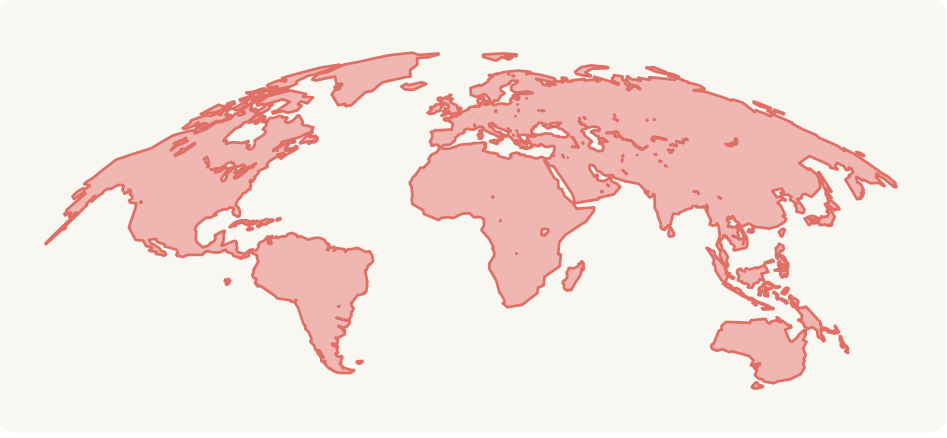
Let's start right at the beginning!

What is digital accessibility?

"Digital accessibility" means building digital content and applications that can be used by people with disabilities. This can apply to websites, mobile apps, desktop apps, video games, electronic documents, and more.

"An estimated 1.3 billion people experience significant disability. This represents 16% of the world's population, or 1 in 6 of us."

—World Health Organization



How do people with disabilities use the internet?

Many people with disabilities use some form of assistive technology to navigate computers, mobile devices, and other digital content and experiences. Examples include:

Screen reader software	Screen reader software reads out content to people who are blind and allows them to navigate via keyboard shortcuts.
Screen magnification software	Screen magnification software or other hardware tools magnify screens to extreme levels, helping people with low vision see what's on their screen more clearly.
Text-to-Speech (TTS) and reading tools	Text-to-Speech (TTS) and reading tools read text aloud within browsers or applications, often highlighting words as they're read. These tools help people with cognitive differences access content.
Keyboard-only navigation	Keyboard-only navigation enables individuals with visual or motor impairments to navigate entirely by keyboard or devices that emulate keyboard-style input.
Dictation software	Dictation software enables people to navigate by voice, which is helpful for those who have trouble with computer input devices but can speak.
Pointer alternatives and adaptive mice	Pointer alternatives and adaptive mice enhance standard pointing devices. Tools such as head-controlled pointers, eye-gaze systems, and sip-and-puff devices help people with fine motor disabilities who cannot use their voice to navigate.

How do I know if my site or app is accessible?

The only way to know if your site is accessible is to test it. An accessibility audit is generally performed through a combination of automated, guided, and manual accessibility testing.

Automated testing: Software tools automatically evaluate your code for accessibility issues.

> **Pros:** Quality tools can accurately detect hundreds of basic accessibility issues in seconds. Using these tools generally doesn't require special accessibility expertise.
>
> **Cons:** These tools cannot detect all accessibility issues. Some issues are simply more complex or require special expertise to identify.

Guided testing: An AI-powered tool uses a question-and-answer approach to guide you through the testing process.

> **Pros:** Intelligent Guided Tests (IGTs) are more comprehensive, while still allowing humans to make final decisions.
>
> **Cons:** They're not as fast as automated testing and still require manual interpretation.

Manual testing: An accessibility specialist reviews code to identify issues that could create barriers to assistive technology use. In addition, they attempt to navigate and interact with your application using different types of assistive technology.

> **Pros:** The process is thorough and helps you get a complete understanding of your level of digital accessibility.
>
> **Cons:** It's time-consuming and requires special expertise.

Reminder: Avoid the overlay trap!

When choosing accessibility testing tools, remember that overlays and widgets don't fix accessibility. They treat symptoms, not causes, and they don't meet compliance requirements. With the right tools, you'll find and fix what really matters.

Accessibility regulations

There are many reasons why it's vital to achieve and maintain digital accessibility. Critically, there may be accessibility laws that apply to your organization. When you're conducting an accessibility audit and testing for digital accessibility, one thing you're testing for is "compliance"—whether you're meeting legal and regulatory requirements.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Updates to the ADA's Title II now mandate that software and IT services be accessible to people with disabilities.

Section 508

Section 508 prohibits disability discrimination in federal programs and requires the federal government to provide equal access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

The European Accessibility Act (EAA)

The EAA is a directive of the European Union that aims to improve the accessibility of products and services for people with disabilities and the aging population in the EU.

In the United States, in 2024 alone, plaintiffs filed 8,800 ADA Title III complaints in federal district courts.
—Seyfarth's ADA Title III team, Seyfarth Shaw LLP

How does accessibility help my organization?

Digital accessibility provides a range of benefits for your organization, including expanded market share, increased visibility, better customer experiences, greater loyalty, and more.

In the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, and Canada alone, the disability marketplace represents over $2.6 trillion of disposable income.

When you expand this to include friends and family of people with disabilities, the global disability market is valued at over $18 trillion.

Source: The Global Economics of Disability Report: 2024 (Return on Disability Group)

Accessibility increases visibility	Digital accessibility techniques can help your site's search optimization (SEO). Accessible websites are also easier for AI search engines to crawl and index.
Accessibility improves user experience	Accessibility features such as video captions, voice search, and dark mode help everyone.
Accessibility is inclusive	Accessibility is part of fostering a more inclusive brand workplace. In a world where people's choices are increasingly values-driven, accessibility sets your organization apart.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and EN 301 549

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), developed by the W3C, are widely accepted as the go-to standard for digital accessibility.

They serve as the basis for most accessibility regulations worldwide, including EN 301 549, the most comprehensive standard for global digital accessibility. It references WCAG 2.1 (and soon 2.2) and also covers software, documents, and hardware.

Aligning with EN 301 549 + WCAG 2.2 Level AA provides strong global coverage, reduces legal risk, and ensures that your products meet modern accessibility expectations.

According to WCAG, digital content should be:

P Perceivable

O Operable

U Understandable

R Robust

How does my organization become accessible?

Immediate needs

Your organization may be under legal pressure, or have another compliance deadline to meet. If that's the case, you have an immediate need to address digital accessibility issues. Here is a recommended approach for these kinds of situations:

Step 1: Get an expert accessibility audit report. Ensure it's clear and that all product and site stakeholders understand the results.

Step 2: Prioritize accessibility issues by severity, traffic, and the criticality of the component to your users.

Step 3: Fix those accessibility issues! Make sure your team has been thoroughly trained in accessibility issue remediation through bootcamps and embedded support from accessibility specialists. Depending on your deadlines and budget, you may want to outsource your accessibility remediation.

Step 4: Perform validation testing to ensure that all accessibility fixes actually work. This can be done by in-house specialists or the consultants who performed your initial audit.

This process can be stressful, but by working with experienced experts, you can find a solution that fits your needs and deadlines.

Long-term growth

If your organization isn't facing legal pressure or if you're working on new sites and applications, taking a proactive approach to accessibility is an ideal way to minimize future risk while securing all the long-term benefits that come with being accessible.

Step 1: Train your developers, testers, and content creators in accessibility concepts and techniques.

Step 2: Get any new design wireframes reviewed for accessibility optimization and potential issue identification.

Step 3: Equip your development teams with tools to integrate accessibility testing into all stages of the development process.

Step 4: Establish internal policies and processes to ensure the accessibility of digital products, content, and any third-party tools you may be using.

Proactive accessibility not only reduces your organization's risk of receiving a legal complaint about accessibility, but also minimizes disruptions and makes the entire accessibility process more efficient and cost-effective.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