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## White Paper: Website Accessibility Community IT Innovators (CITI)

Brian Dunn, Senior Developer

[bdunn@citidc.com](mailto:bdunn@citidc.com), 202-234-1600 ext. 391

*Searching for information on website accessibility can be a confusing and frustrating experience. Answers to even the most basic questions often seem incomplete, exaggerated, overly technical, or even misleading. Proponents of website accessibility tend to overstate its benefits or make it out to be the panacea of all your website woes, while accessibility naysayers urge abandoning attempts at accessibility altogether. This whitepaper is an attempt to provide a balanced look at website accessibility, and to help non-profits decide how it fits in with their priorities.*

### Basic definition

It may be helpful to start out with a description of what we mean by website accessibility. Most often people interpret website accessibility to mean making their website accessible to people with disabilities (especially disabilities involving vision, hearing and dexterity). While this does make up a significant portion of what we mean by website accessibility, it would be a mistake to leave it at this. Efforts to make your website more accessible can also address the needs of other people including:

- *older people*
- *people who prefer to operate their computer without using a mouse*
- *people with low literacy*
- *people who are not fluent in the website's language*
- *people using alternative browsing devices such as cell phones*
- *people with low bandwidth internet connections or older technology*
- *new or infrequent web users*
- *people with website scripting disabled for heightened security*

With some brainstorming we could likely expand this list. Website accessibility is a broad concept, and it's important to keep an open mind when thinking about it. Luckily you don't need an absolute definition of website accessibility in order to begin removing the barriers that keep some people from accessing your website.

### Why should I make my website accessible?

An accessible website can provide a number of benefits to an organization including:

- *an increased website audience including people who might not otherwise be able to use the website*
- *an improved experience for all website visitors as accessibility improvements often make a website easier to use*
- *easier delivery of printer friendly functionality*
- *easier distribution of information to people with some disabilities such as blindness or deafness*
- *demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility*
- *lightweight pages which take less time to load*



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- *reduced time for changes to website presentation*
- *fulfillment of legal requirements or institutional policies*

The benefits gained from an accessible website will vary depending on the goals of each organization. For example an organization that works with blind people will benefit from being better able to reach its constituency. Another organization that provides home visits might benefit most by making it possible for staff members to access information on their website using handheld browsing devices. Organizations with a website should consider devoting some time to analyzing how the organization could benefit from making its website accessible, and prioritizing the resulting list.

### **What do I need to do to make my website accessible?**

This is the point at which website accessibility can seem overwhelming. Most organizations would like to have a simple checklist of what it takes to make their website accessible. What they find instead is multiple dissimilar lists which can be long, confusing and overly technical.

One such list, referred to as Section 508 Standards<sup>1</sup>, consists of guidelines that Federal agency websites are required to meet by law. This list is somewhat brief however, and most organizations can think of additional accessibility guidelines that are not covered by these standards.

Another set of guidelines is the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)<sup>2</sup>. This exhaustive set of guidelines is broken down into three subsets referred to as "priorities". Organizations may be able to identify guidelines on this list that don't apply to them, or are too cost prohibitive for them to implement.

While a full list of guidelines would be too lengthy for this whitepaper, the following examples will help give an idea of what the guidelines involve. Some of the guidelines are technical or involve changes to the design and layout of the website, and may require the assistance of a web designer or web developer to implement. For example:

- *Provide a means of skipping past repetitive navigation links.*
- *Use sufficiently contrasting foreground and background colors. Avoid combinations of red and green as well as busy background images.*
- *Avoid using absolute sizes for fonts. Set font sizes using relative measurements or avoid setting font sizes altogether.*

Other guidelines involve decisions about the content of the website:

- *Use the clearest, simplest, and most concise language appropriate for a page's subject matter.*
- *Make sure that links are understandable out of context. Avoid using link text such as "click here" and "more".*
- *Provide text transcripts for audio containing speech.*
- *Provide full text for each abbreviation or acronym where it first occurs on a page. Include a glossary explaining all abbreviations and acronyms.*
- *Avoid flickering, blinking, and unnecessary animation.*
- *Provide alternate text for images which convey information.*
- *Avoid using images to display text. Text that requires exact formatting, such as logos, are appropriate exceptions.*

Given the varying lists, the vast number of steps that can be taken to make a website more accessible, and the different accessibility needs of each organization, it is often necessary for an organization to develop its own list of guidelines. A good example is the Illinois Web Accessibility Standards<sup>3</sup>, which combines elements from both the Section 508 Standards and the WCAG guidelines. They include a list of their accessibility priorities (they refer to them as performance criteria), and a list of guidelines that they will enforce.

When making your own list of accessibility guidelines, you will likely want to borrow guidelines from these two sources, search for additional guideline suggestions online, look at guidelines from other organizations, and brainstorm to come up with your own ideas. Coming up with a list of accessibility priorities before starting this endeavor can help an organization make decisions about which guidelines should not be adopted. A technology consultant can help clarify overly technical guidelines and provide estimates on what each guideline will take to implement.

### **Challenges and costs of accessibility.**

Website accessibility does not come without its challenges. The most notable challenges are:

- *the difficulty involved in determining accessibility needs and choosing appropriate guidelines*
- *increased website development costs*
- *increased staff involvement in maintaining website content (editing, accessibility analysis and testing, training, etc)*
- *poor integration with existing software such as content management systems or word processors*
- *lack of immediate measurable benefit, especially when compared to investing in something like a clever flash animation for the homepage which might attract more visitors*

One extremely important thing to keep in mind when considering the costs of making your website accessible is that it is much more affordable to plan for accessibility from the beginning than it is to retrofit an existing site.

- *An organization that is developing a new website, or redesigning an existing website, should ensure that the new design is accessible. While it will add more time to the redesign project, it is much more affordable than making the website accessible later.*
- *An organization that needs to retrofit an existing site to make it accessible should consider including a website redesign, as it may reduce the costs of implementing accessibility guidelines.*

### **Conclusion**

While there are challenges and additional costs involved in making a website accessible, the benefits of doing so are not insignificant. This is especially true for non-profits, where taking intentional actions in socially responsible ways, such as accommodating websites for persons with disabilities, is often a central value of the organization. Non-profit organizations that maintain a website should think about accessibility priorities. Decisions to not implement website accessibility guidelines should result from careful consideration and not from negligence.



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## References

- (1) <http://www.section508.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=Content&ID=12>
- (2) <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/> .
- (3) <http://www.illinois.gov/iwas/standards/iwasStandards.cfm>

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