

Web, Enabled

By Donna J. Abernathy

Your Website either enables or disables the visually impaired worker who's trying to read the beautifully detailed bar graph on your homepage. Considering that there are approximately 1.5 million visually disabled computer users in the United States—a conservative estimate from the U.S. Census Bureau—making the Web more accessible is not just the right thing to do, but also makes good business sense.

Visually impaired workers represent

only one group of disabled users. Consider how people who are hearing impaired, dyslexic, or paralyzed use the Web—or in many cases, can't use it because of technology or design limitations. Accessibility touches everyone. Who among our aging workforce, for example, can claim that he or she will never need help reading, hearing, or navigating the Web?

Here's a snapshot of Web accessibility resources, tips, and views.

Know Thy User

If you're not a person with a disability—such as loss of vision, hearing, or mobility—then it's likely that you're not familiar with the needs of disabled Web surfers. Says Michael G. Paciello, author of *Web Accessibility for People With Disabilities* (CMP Books, 2000), "It's much easier to explain what you need to do to make your Website more accessible when administrators, designers, and engineers understand the user characteristics of the disabled."

People with visual disabilities may be concerned about Web accessibility, Paciello says, because of the graphical nature of the Web. But it's important to remember the needs raised by other disabilities. People with dyslexia, for example, benefit from brief, easily digestible text. Captioning helps people who are hard of hearing.

The 508 News

All new information technology products acquired or developed by U.S. government agencies and departments must be accessible by people with disabilities, according to standards established by Section 508 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act.

New Federal Websites are covered by Section 508 standards, but existing sites don't have to comply with them. Many government IT staffs, however, are voluntarily redesigning their Web

sites to accommodate disabled users and such assistive technology as screen readers and Braille displays.

Indications are that Section 508 standards, which have been in effect since June, may ripple out to the private sector to become the norm.

<» www.section508.gov

Sizzlin' Sites

- The **Access Board** is an independent federal agency devoted to accessibility for people with disabilities. <» www.access-board.gov
- **Bobby** is a free online tool that helps you identify and repair Web access barriers. <» cast.org/bobby
- The **Equal Access to Software and Information** site includes educational resources for students and professionals with disabilities. <» www.rit.edu/~easi
- The U.S. Department of Labor's **Office of Disability Employment Policy** offers numerous free disability materials and services. <» www.dol.gov/dol/odep
- **Usable Web** presents links on information architecture and design issues that affect disabled people's use of the Internet. <» usableweb.com
- The goal of the **Web Accessibility Initiative** is to improve Internet accessibility for disabled people. <» w3.org/wai

UpData

The United Kingdom, Brazil, Sweden, and Australia (and others) are spearheading major assistive technology and Web-access projects. Sweden's Accessibility Project, for example, has announced plans to make Stockholm the most accessible capital city in the world by 2010.

A Little Alt Tag Goes a Long Way

Here's a sampling of user-friendly design tips for Web managers and developers.

- Provide alternate text links (alt tags) for all Web images.
- Avoid scrolling marquees.
- Provide closed captions for audio content.

<» microsoft.com/enable/dev/web

Hit and Myth

A common misunderstanding about workers with disabilities is that it costs big bucks to accommodate them. That, according to the U.S. Department of Labor Website, is a

myth. In fact, DOL claims, most workers with disabilities require little or no special accommodations or assistive technology, and the cost for those who do is lower than many employers believe.

Studies by the Office of Disability Employment Policy's Job Accommodation Network have shown that 15 percent of accommodations cost nothing, 51 percent cost US\$1 to \$500, 12 percent cost \$501 to \$1,000, and 22 percent cost more than \$1,000.

www.dol.gov/dol/odep/public/pubs/fact/mythfact.htm

Diverse E-Learning

E-learning for disabled learners is the topic of a 2001 Brandon Hall report that identifies some key catalysts accelerating this growing market. In "Accessible E-Learning: 2001 Market Trends and Evaluation Tips," Hall points to the following:

- aggressive corporate and government diversity initiatives, internal mandates to increase e-learning use, and far-reaching government accessibility regulations and policies
- a rapidly aging workforce characterized by a sharp rise in disabilities
- the growing economic and political power of persons with disabilities.

brandon-hall.com/accel.htm

So Many Suppliers, So Little Time

The Information Technology Industry Council of Washington, D.C., has developed a free online assessment tool that helps determine whether IT products are Section 508 compliant.

The Voluntary Product Accessibility Template should be of particular interest to Federal contractors that need to assess how well commercial electronic and IT products and services—such as software, desktop computers, and multimedia—support disabled accessibility. Check it out at www.itic.org

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