



# The Growing Importance of Accessible Websites

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## Introduction – What’s Web Accessibility All About?

Accessibility on the Internet is about ensuring that access to the wealth of knowledge provided online is not restricted by unnecessary barriers. It is particularly associated with the practice of accommodating the needs of disabled people when building a website. However, accessibility entails more than considering the needs of those with cognitive, physical, hearing or visual impairments. **A more accessible website can make the surfing experience better for everyone.**

Web accessibility also involves embracing both new and old technologies, ensuring that information is available in a suitable form for the wide variety of devices used to access the Internet. Devices such as mobile phones, personal digital assistants and in-car browsers are already in use, yet so many websites are inaccessible to these browsing technologies. Websites should be flexible enough to display on devices such as these, while degrading gracefully to work with older technologies. Also, as many Web surfers are embracing broadband Internet access, Web Designers need to remember that a considerable portion of their clients’ audience still uses slower connections. Unduly delaying access to the content of a website can put visitors off and businesses risk losing custom as a result.

Technology considerations apart, accessibility shares some goals with the field of **usability**, which concerns the ease with which visitors interact with a website. Research has shown usability considerations to be **essential to the success of a website**. For example, what use is website navigation if none of the links tell you where they are going? Unfortunately, this is exactly what can happen for blind Web surfers. Websites can be read aloud to a user by means of software called “screen readers”. When a screen reader encounters an image, it requires alternative text to be provided so that the meaning of the image can be conveyed to the user. Image-based navigation menus that don’t provide such information are all too common, and render the navigation, and the website, unusable.

In April, the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) released a report detailing the results of a year-long investigation into the accessibility of 1000 UK websites. The report revealed that nearly **81% of the websites examined failed to conform to basic accessibility guidelines** set out by the Web Accessibility Initiative, part of the World Wide Web Consortium. This shows that far too many businesses and public sector organisations are failing to seriously consider the accessibility of their websites and, as such, are failing to realise the full potential of their presence on the Web. A website that can reach a larger audience is an advantage both to its owners and its visitors, and in many cases involves **less time and effort to create and maintain**.

## Benefits – Carrots and a Stick

So, what's in it for you? There are significant advantages of having a website that has been designed with accessibility in mind. Sites incorporating accessible design concepts not only reach a significantly **larger audience**, but also prove to be **more usable for all visitors**. It is entirely possible to create an attractive yet accessible website and thus negate the need for sustaining costly "text-only" versions of websites, which effectively segregates an audience and does not lead to equality of access. Lastly, by having an accessible site, businesses and organisations can **gain respect and good publicity**.

There are also technical benefits to accessible Web Design. A website built to comply with appropriate standards has better underlying structure, making it more **attractive to search engines**.

Consequently, a website becomes more findable and more inviting for visitors. Using the latest standards for Web Technologies carries with it **notable improvements in performance and return**. It costs less to maintain websites that use modern technologies such as Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), which allows changes to the overall presentation of a website to be made quickly and with ease. Such technologies also make websites faster to use.

The stick: An inaccessible website can expose its owners to the **possibility of legal action**. Since Section III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) came into force in **October 1999**, website owners have been obliged to show evidence of having made "reasonable adjustments" to their sites in order to accommodate the needs of disabled people. These "reasonable adjustments" may mean giving extra help or making changes to the way online services are provided, and should be embodied within an Accessibility Policy.

It is often believed that new DDA legislation, which comes into force in October 2004, entails a deadline for website accessibility. The new laws only relate to making adjustments to "physical features of [providers'] premises to overcome physical barriers to access". As such, the laws already in place concerning websites are not affected. The DRC's Code of Practice specifically refers to accessible websites, and can be downloaded from their website: [DRC Codes of Practice](#)

## More Information on Web Accessibility

More information can be found online. Some good points of reference include:

### ["Guide to Good Practice in Commissioning Accessible Websites"](#)

Publicly Available Specification (PAS) 78 ("Guide to Good Practice in Commissioning Accessible Websites") provides free guidance to commissioning accessible websites.

### [Web Accessibility Initiative](#)

Part of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) actively promotes accessibility on the Internet. They are responsible for publishing guidelines such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).

### [DRC Formal Investigation into Web Accessibility](#)

The DRC website has more information about the findings of their formal investigation into the current state of accessibility on the Web. They also provide clips of the press launch for the report from 14 April 2004.

### [Business Benefits of Accessible Web Design](#)

A useful resource provided by the Web Accessibility Initiative detailing the business benefits of accessible Web Design.

### [Web Accessibility Articles from Webcredible](#)

Clear and informative articles covering Web accessibility by usability and accessibility specialists, Webcredible. Website owners may be particularly interested in the articles from 2004.

### [Guild of Accessible Web Designers](#)

The Guild of Accessible Web Designers (GAWDS) is an association of organisations and accessible Web designers and developers.

### [AccessibleNet.org](#)

This website provides a comprehensive directory of links and resources on Web Accessibility.