Chapter XII

Sustaining Internet Accessibility

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Abstract

In this chapter, accessibility is defined as providing barrier-free Internet applications for those with physical and other disabilities. In some nations, accessibility to government Web sites and Web-based applications is the law. In the private sector, providing accessible Web sites makes good business sense. It increases productivity of employees who use it, expands the markets of businesses that provide it, and enhances the reputation of organizations that employ it. Although there are cost and time challenges for Web designers who incorporate accessibility, these may be overcome through careful planning and a thorough understanding of accessible design principles. Accessible design means simple design, which benefits all users.
Introduction

This chapter focuses on accessibility to the Internet for those with disabilities. The Web serves as a bridge between nations, and all people should have effective access to it. The Web is used increasingly to transact business, enhance communication, and spread culture beyond national borders. Increasingly, it is also being used as a learning medium. What are the challenges to ensuring accessibility for all? What are the benefits to individuals and society? What Web design elements are necessary for maintaining accessibility? What is the U.S. law for accessibility? What is the international community doing to successfully promote accessibility?

Accessibility and Web Design Culture

Sustaining accessibility requires overcoming challenges. These challenges are often rooted in a lack of understanding. Some are the result of misconceptions regarding the difficulties of implementing accessible Web-based programs. Web design culture is occasionally inhospitable to accessibility. Web designers are often young people lacking physical disabilities, which may contribute to a lack of awareness of the issue of accessibility (Accessible Web Sites, 2004). Kiser (2001) points out in Online Learning that Web designers often incorporate flashy graphics and gadgetry in their applications, which can conflict with simple designs necessary for accessibility.

Organizations sometimes encourage misconceptions regarding accessibility. Online learning developers and providers, for instance, place a premium on interaction in their products and believe that incorporating accessible features into their products will erode interactive features (E-Learning: Conforming to Section 508, n.d.). In addition, institutions that provide learning are often at a loss on how to deal with the disabled, and lack of experience in dealing with them is often to blame (Cook & Gladhart, n.d.). Many organizations do not view accessibility as a priority, and even those who recognize the need for it often do not have the experience to successfully implement it in online learning. A survey of literature in the distance learning field reveals a lack of information on accessible online learning. In addition, disabled users are often invisible online, so their problems are often not fully understood or appreciated by Web developers (Schmetzke, n.d.).

There are other factors that discourage accessibility. Web designers often feel overwhelmed with work assignments and may believe that they do not have the
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