Chapter 9

Website Accessibility and the Role of Accessibility Statements

C. M. Parkinson
Loughborough University, UK

C. W. Olphert
Loughborough University, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter defines accessibility in the broader context of usability and explains the importance of making websites accessible as well as usable. It then focuses on one particular aspect of website accessibility – the accessibility statement, which is a declaration on a website about the accessibility of the site to disabled people and others with accessibility needs. This chapter argues that accessibility statements can play an important part in website accessibility if they are appropriately designed and targeted. Based on an extensive literature review and detailed examination of a large sample of accessibility statements, the chapter presents an overview of current practice and usage, raises and discusses the problematic issues that arise when developing accessibility statements, and provides recommendations for best practice.

INTRODUCTION

The overall aim of this book is to explore the crucial role that usability plays in the design of successful and effective websites. In this chapter we argue that websites must not only be usable but they must also be accessible. The definition of usability provided by ISO 9241 is: “the extent to which a product [or website] can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use” (International Standards Organisation, 1992/2000). While there is no single standard definition of accessibility as there is for usability, there is consensus that the goal of accessibility is to ensure that a product, system or service can be used by people with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. Therefore, as suggested by Petrie and Kheir (2007 p.397), accessibility can be considered as “usability for people with disabilities”. An accessible website will be one that has been designed so that people with functional limitations (e.g. visual, motor, cognitive
Website Accessibility and the Role of Accessibility Statements

and auditory impairments) and situational limitations (e.g. those using alternative web-access equipment) can freely access the content of the site. An accessible website is “perceivable, operable and understandable”, without barriers, for all people (Thatcher et al, 2002, pp. 8-13).

The chapter begins by making the case for website accessibility. It will go on to review the guidance that is available for designers seeking to create accessible websites, and will then focus on the role that an accessibility statement can play in this process.

Why is Website Accessibility Important?

There are now a number of key drivers for website accessibility. The first of these is legislation: in many countries, a website which is not accessible, in other words which cannot be accessed freely and fully by people with functional limitations, is likely to be breaking anti-discrimination laws.

The right of all persons to equality before the law and protection against discrimination is acknowledged by the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and many countries have incorporated these rights within their laws. For example, the European Commission Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 (European Commission, 2000) prohibits any direct or indirect discrimination based on religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation against individuals in the workplace throughout the member states of the European Community. Furthermore, numerous countries around the world have introduced specific legislation relating to disabled people. In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been law since 1990 and was amended in 2008. In the United Kingdom, the Disability Discrimination Act has been in place since 1995 and was amended in 2001 to cover provision of post-16 education, and again in 2005 primarily to cover transport and public services. In India the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act was passed in 1995. Many other countries have similar laws.

While much of the legislation initially aimed to prevent discrimination against disabled people in terms of access to work and the workplace, the thrust of recent laws and amendments has been to prevent such discrimination in other aspects of life. For example, the European Commission Directive mentioned above was extended in July 2008 to provide protection beyond the workplace. This new directive aims to ensure equal treatment in the areas of social protection, including social security and health care, education and access to and supply of goods and services which are commercially available to the public. Websites, which are increasingly being used to deliver such services, are included under disability discrimination legislation. A Code of Practice produced by the Disability Rights Commission in the UK specifically mentions websites in relation to the Disability Discrimination Act: “An airline company provides a flight reservation and booking service to the public on its website. This is a provision of a service and is subject to the Act”. (Disability Rights Commission, 2002, cited by Massie, 2005). There are already examples of prosecutions being brought under disability discrimination legislation against organisations who fail to make their websites accessible. For instance, an influential case in Australia (Maguire v Sydney Organising Committee of the Olympic Games – SOCOG) found SOCOG to have failed in its obligations to make its website accessible (Sloan, 2001).

A second driver for website accessibility is to prevent social exclusion. Although internet use is increasing across the globe, accessibility problems contribute to ‘digital divides’ (Ellison, 2004) in society between those who can and those who cannot make full and effective use of this technology and the benefits that it can provide. The internet and web-based services have tremendous potential for disabled people. A survey carried out for the