

Accessibility 2022

Interactive agencies being part of the change

Web accessibility is still a big obstacle to overcome in the digital world, but it's also a bigger opportunity to even the field of opportunities for millions of people. Find out what members from agencies around the globe are doing to move forward.

TIA TOP INTERACTIVE AGENCIES



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Introduction

As we know, it's been some time since **websites, apps and platforms** form part of our daily lives, being the means to access the majority of information and services that we need and care about. The greatest **advantage of the Web** is its **universality**, and yet, most of the time, **accessibility** isn't the key criteria when it comes to building digital products.

The Web is today an **essential resource** in many aspects of our life, such as education, employment, government, commerce, recreation, health care, and more. And as we advance towards a greater **digitalization of our lives**, we, as designers and developers, need to make decisions as to what kind of Web we want to build together.

There are more than 1 billion people worldwide that have a long term disability, which often can affect their ability to move around the Web. That is, when websites and applications are badly designed in terms of usability. Because in essence, the Web is infinite in its possibilities of **universality**. It's fundamentally designed to be accessed by anyone, from anywhere in the world. And to people with disabilities, it can represent a way to **remove the barriers to communication** and interaction that they find in the physical world. But it's up to each one of us to make that vision possible.

We wanted to know how the interactive industry was dealing with this issue. So we went to talk to people from different cultures around the world, to know: what is **accessibility** to them, how can we advance towards it, and what they have been doing to make the Web **accessible for all**.

#Accessibility #Inclusion #AccessibilityForAll



Rory Mullin

Co-Founder | Production Director at Hammerhead
Vancouver, Canada

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

It's no secret that we are moving towards a digital Era. You can see it as the new generation moves to online autonomy - they use it for every facet of their existence, and the older generations are catching up to them quickly. In essence, digital design is responsible for how we all interact with the digital world. It creates the structures that provide people with information that is becoming more and more exclusive to the internet, and this is a concern to those who have a hard time naturally interacting with those interfaces. It should be considered a big responsibility for anyone contributing to it to do it in a way that includes as many people as possible.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

There is a lot that can be done when developing from a custom solution that will take care of the basic stuff. Similar to accessibility in the real world, online accessibility is much more than a set of rules to follow when building something. It is a ground-floor-up way of thinking that doesn't only include how you build the structure of your website, but all facets of digital strategy such as marketing, asset design, content entry, and even routine maintenance. It's like the coffee shop with a ramp and accessible washrooms that have tables and chairs too close together for a wheelchair to get by. The architect and builder considered accessibility, but the service staff didn't think about it, and therefore it became momentarily pointless.

The other thing to consider is that online accessibility is not set in stone. New technologies emerge to help more people use the internet, and technology moves fast. Accessibility guidelines are updated regularly because of this, so it's not just something you think about when you first design a product, but something that needs to be revisited again and again. It is best to think of digital products as living organisms that need to grow and adapt with society as time goes on.

The best way to battle both of these things is to either use a team that understands accessibility standards, and can manage, maintain and implement them as needed. Or perform regular accessibility audits.

As to the cost of this; it seems more like a business no brainer to me. The more people you have using your product, the more successful it is. An estimated 3.8 million U.S. adults aged 21-64 are blind or have trouble seeing, even with glasses. An estimated 71% of website visitors with disabilities will leave a website that is not accessible - doing the math, this means that over 2.5 million American web users with purchasing power won't use your website if you're not accessible, and that number continues to grow.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

We're sticklers for web best practices at Hammerhead, so as I mentioned before a lot of the basic stuff comes out of the box with our custom products. As a small example, we build accessibility-friendly structures which allow for a better experience with screen readers. This helps visually impaired users navigate websites. We also try to educate our clients about accessibility online when doing any training courses in the hope that they adhere to best practices when making any changes - this could be something as simple as using alt tags on images which, among other things, provides an auditory description of the image to a user that cannot see, or making sure to include closed caption options for instructional videos.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

This is absolutely what I believe. Unfortunately, it is much harder said than done. Always remember you are dealing with a global reach when talking about the internet. Accessibility standards vary greatly across the real world, and some places don't consider them at all. Because of this, I think it should be the responsibility of companies to change their way of thinking and consider accessibility best practices when assembling their digital team, or choosing their digital partners. [insert 'with great power, comes great responsibility' meme here].



Natsuko Sakai

Project Manager at Garden Eight
Tokyo, Japan



What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

Digital design has the role of delivering the right information to the right people. Websites a large number of people visit should be structured where information is fairly available to as many people as possible. One of the strengths of digital design, which enables interactive communication, is that it is easy to convey information. In addition, and this is not limited to digital, we believe that the design process can make aware of people who might otherwise be forgotten. We believe that digital design for a larger audience is in an important position to think through accessibility.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

I believe that this is true now, but it should be rectified. As with barrier-free systems in the real world, it is natural that it costs money and effort at first. As the way of thinking in the industry matures, I think the cost will naturally come down. Researching and realizing the goal of accessible design requires considerable effort and time. We may not have to target everyone at the beginning, but the goal should be to understand the subject and deliver the appropriate product to the people who need it. Also, the cost of educating users will be paid by the service side, but it should help foster a stronger community as users become more familiar with the rules.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Yes, we try to make it easy for anyone to connect from any environment or device. We understand that the awareness and work to reach everyone is called accessible design. That attitude of never giving up on accessibility is installed in the team as a basic concept. Specifically, we keep in mind the Semantic Web where the machine can directly recognize the language when building a site. It allows a machine to read aloud to a person who has seeing difficulties, etc. Also, we always pay attention to basic rules like font size and colors.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

I think it should exist as one standard, but the diversity in the public should be protected and I wonder if it can be used in an absolute evaluation. To begin with, the concept of public means open, but I do not think it is synonymous with having to open it unconditionally to everyone. I view public spaces as places that the country creates for living like community centers and libraries. In the first place, since you set up your own server on the Internet, it may be close to the recognition of private property. However, for public websites, accessibility standards can be an important indicator.

Additional note:

While it is important to make things that are inclusive and accessible, let me conclude with an episode that raised questions in myself. In Japan, Sen no Rikyu (千利休) built a tea ceremony room where one cannot enter while standing and must stoop down. It is said that the meaning is that he wanted people to take off their status, titles, etc., and become just a person equally to everyone. He also hopes that bending over their head will allow them to look at their feet and give a feeling of self-reflection. Although this is not a good design from an accessibility and usability point of view, this experience is unique.



Tom Bamford

Digital Accessibility Developer at Annertech
Dublin, Ireland

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

Recent years have seen an acceleration in services, especially in the public sector, moving to digital first. This reflects growing user expectations and behaviour change, where everything should be available 24/7 and easily accessible. The Covid-19 pandemic – where mobility, be it social or physical, became increasingly limited – particularly exposed this need for services to be available online.

This in itself caused barriers to many users experiencing disability, already isolated by the pandemic, because not enough consideration was given to accessibility due to the scramble to make digital products rapidly available.

For the first time, a majority of the population experienced the barriers of rushed, poorly considered and designed digital products, as their access to the usual (or alternative) in-person interactions were severely limited or removed altogether.

The sudden shift to working from home exposed the difficulties of isolation, adaptation of one's environment and the need for businesses to provide digital tools for remote work.

Although workers are now returning to the office, a large and vocal majority of the population has even greater expectations of digital products, how it should make life easier, not frustrate and cause barriers in difficult times.

Digital design needs to meet those expectations, and the best way forward for that is to start with accessibility, or better inclusivity. Redefining the baseline standard will pave the way toward a more accessible society.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

That idea often stems from the fact that accessibility comes as an afterthought to the design, development and even testing process. Therefore the product will often require:

- Re-evaluating the design and implementation of parts, or even entire sections of the product.
- Finding skilled professionals to review, train and guide through remediation techniques and best practices.
- Getting buy-in from team and stakeholders.

Shifting accessibility left in the Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC) means challenges are identified in initial stages, and training and resourcing can be done upfront.

This process shift can also help ensure an early focus on performance and security, and this will greatly benefit accessibility implementation.

The most expensive aspect of the SDLC is often the “re-work” involved when issues are discovered at late stages. Shifting left ensures greater resilience and minimal waste across the board.

Consider that 1 in 5 Canadian adults identify as having some disability, and about 20% of the UK population have some form of sensory disability. If we include situational and temporary disabilities, the percentage of your digital product's users experiencing disability will be much higher. The cost of ignoring the barriers preventing those users from using your product will be far higher than investing in accessibility from the start.

The difficulty is these costs are often invisible, leading to this idea of accessibility being the expensive option. Another aspect is the significant overlap between accessibility and usability, and improved usability has been clearly demonstrated to provide significant gain in adoption and conversion rates, so a net benefit.

Tom Bamford

Digital Accessibility Developer at Annertech
Dublin, Ireland

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Accessibility is definitely considered from the start of the design process, to ensure that colours, typography, structure and media follow the W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) principles. We also encourage regular reviews of designs with team members to catch any potential implementation challenges early on.

Our internal communication tool has a channel dedicated to accessibility, serving as an open space to ask questions or post useful resources and learning materials. This has been instrumental in rapidly unblocking team members when they have the slightest doubt.

The increasing interest by clients in accessibility – especially from the public sector following the first round of compliance reporting for the European Union's Web Accessibility Directive (Directive (EU) 2016/2102) – has been helpful in pushing for ever more accessibility considerations in the design phase.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

This is already the case to some extent with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States, the Equality Act (EQA) 2010 in the United Kingdom, and similar legislation in many other countries, especially since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

However, unlike for public spaces and workplaces, there are rarely any mandated inspections or reporting for websites and, besides a few court cases in the United States lodged by individuals, rarely any penalties issued.

However, this should start to change with the European Union's Web Accessibility Directive (Directive (EU) 2016/2102), where compliance with the W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 level AA is required. The directive goes beyond just the public sector and applies to organisations that provide important services to the public or specifically to people with disabilities, for example higher-education institutions.

It also encourages member states to “extend the application of this Directive to private entities that offer facilities and services which are open or provided to the public, including in the healthcare, childcare, social inclusion and social security areas, as well as in the transport sector and the electricity, gas, heat, water, electronic communication and postal services”.

December 2021 saw the publication of all EU member states' initial reports, with subsequent reporting every three years. Monitoring by each state's relevant body will continue and increase in scope, providing regular feedback loops for organisations.

This public airing of what is a widespread lack of compliance has rapidly led to an accelerated interest in ensuring accessibility, mainly in the public sector. As the reporting increasingly applies to private businesses we can hope for a similar behaviour shift.

Once the initial scramble to fix existing systems stabilises, organisations will be mindful of ensuring compliance in the long-term. This should lead to a positive disruptive effect on the software industry as a whole, as the attention shifts towards accessible, even inclusive, deliverables.

Indeed, it is right that the focus, in the physical and digital world, should be that the tools and solutions have accessibility baked-in by default.

The standards and legislation would then serve more as validation, and less threat of punishment.



Victoria Honey

Associate Experience Director at Big Spaceship
New York City, United States

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

Digital design is a powerful connector and driver of innovation. Progress is at the heart of digital design by default - our goal is to evolve and improve products. By stepping away from reliance on a one-fits-all solution, we are able to be as inclusive as possible. This way of being considerate and inclusive allows us to deliver a satisfying user experience to as many people as possible. Creating an accessible design agenda not only helps consumers use a digital product, it also benefits the businesses who value accessibility.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

Keeping accessibility top of mind early in the project is of utmost importance. By identifying issues or concerns early in our design process, we are able to mitigate the so-called “cost” of inclusivity/accessibility. It shouldn’t be an afterthought or retrofitted and if this early identification approach is taken, any costs should usually be minimal. By being more accessible throughout, digital products become more accessible, and the associated revenues usually outweigh the costs.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

I prefer the term inclusive design. Big Spaceship’s Experience team envisions and builds products for everyone.

Our team invites everyone who is involved on client or internal projects to question our solutions to identify any possible accessibility issues. This allows inclusiveness to be adequately represented in the final deliverable. By looking at solutions from different POVs, our work becomes that much better.

This upcoming fall, we are hosting agency-wide accessibility training with experts certified by IAAP (International Association of Accessibility Professionals). We have an #a11y Slack channel which anyone, regardless of discipline, is encouraged to join to continue the discussion. Just last month, I hosted an Accessibility 101 presentation to encourage everyone on our design team to consider accessibility while designing. This especially applies to younger talent. By introducing concepts and an understanding of the importance that accessibility carries, we are able to empower younger team members to speak up when they identify issues. All of these efforts support Big Spaceship’s progressive approach to digital design. After all, “speak up” is one of our core values.

Websites are public, so shouldn’t they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

Websites and mobile apps should absolutely be measured by the same accessibility standards as physical public spaces.

The American Disabilities Act (ADA) was established before the internet was broadly utilized, yet its writers intentionally meant for it to evolve and remain flexible. ADA prohibits discrimination in “public accommodation” which falls under twelve specific categories such as restaurants, movie theaters, and doctors’ offices. As technology continues to evolve, we find websites and apps which fall under the same categories such as apps to order take-out, stream movies, or meet with a doctor virtually. If we all continue to remain vigilant about standards and requirements for digital products which are ADA/WCAG compliant, we will build a better world - both physically and digitally.



Fernando Mosqueda Santana

Growth Director & Partner at MCK
CDMX, Mexico

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

In MCK are we compromising with the digital tool accessible. The accessibility concept, from Ron Mace until digital platforms is something that is necessary, mainly on countries as Mexico, for instance, because the gap between somebody with G5 connection access on its smartphone, opposite somebody who use a desktop PC, 1024x968 px display size with a 56 kbps connection is common; of course, is necessary to be concern on everything that does not allow to access to this tools, like people with disabilities, hardware limits, connection problems, etc. All the steps on digital design must be thinking from those perspectives.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

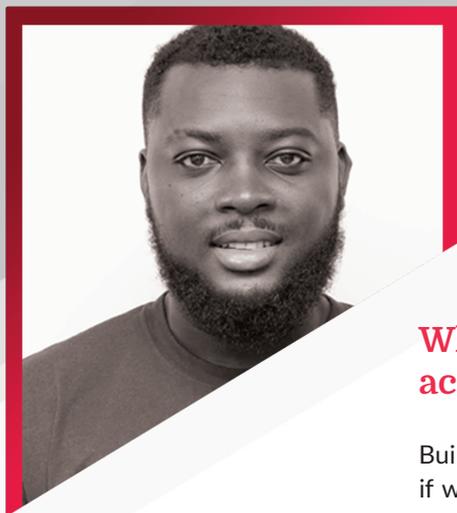
Could be more expensive, yes, but that should be done from the beginning with this perspective. Also it is possible to improve a digital tool in this area –accessibility. It is not expensive, that should be something that should be thought of everyday.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Yes, we have a goal this year, to improve our digital projects on, at least, compliance level A from WCAG. In July 2022 We are going to launch a new service for consulting in order to encourage all companies to create a new accessibility culture in our country, getting close the web to as many people as possible.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

Of course they should! That's the reason why W3C has a department (WAI), to set standards and education about this topic.



James Maxwellson

Lead, Strategy & Growth at Scolptre
Accra, Ghana

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

Building a barrier-free society is not just a nice thing to do, but a must-do and digital design, if well utilized, can be a catalyst. In digital design, having a people-first approach in the development process helps in building an inclusive society. By that, a designer does not just create for everyone but rather takes into consideration the diverse range of people who could be accessing the website, app, or any other form of digital design.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

Yes, it is more expensive. The aspirations of developers to create effective products to make life easier for all, often times conflict with the need to work within specified budgetary thresholds. This phenomenon clearly becomes a bane to developing universally accessible digital products.

Basic development steps such as ideation, prototyping, execution, testing, launching and deployment undergo several layers of consideration using actual persons within both the majority and minority populations to ensure an effective, accessible and usable product is deployed.

Certainly, without proper planning of all the possible layers, the development and deployment of the same would have huge financial implications; thus, making it an expensive venture.

A sure step for making this process less cumbersome and cost-effective which we have considered at Scolptre is employing an iterative development and delivery format for products requiring universal accessibility. Effectively, to ensure adequate financial and operational preparation, accessibility should not be an afterthought.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Yes, we have. At Scolptre, we believe that for a design to be accessible by all, it must first be of good quality, and adhere to recommended best practices for good design.

As such, we are very thorough in our work. In our part of the world, it is very unfortunate that digital accessibility has not gained much attention. Nonetheless, we are exploring how best to advocate for digital accessibility and inclusion. Currently, we are planning a social impact programme for children in underserved communities focused on using design to improve learning outcomes.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

It is not easy to conclusively say that because public spaces have accessibility standards, the same should be applied to websites. First of all, the internet is very much decentralised. This means that it's difficult to have a universally applicable standard. Notwithstanding this fact, there is a set of best practices that improve the ranking of websites and make them more accessible, possibly. Having alternative texts to images (helps visually impaired people as they use screen readers) and using colours with more caution (to improve readability among people with low vision) are among the standards to improve accessibility. Digital accessibility is a burgeoning space, more so in our part of the world. There is more to be done by States, organisations, corpora in making websites accessible to the billions of people left behind presently.



Daniel Bulut

Co-Founder of Mindly Studio
Melbourne, Australia

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

Digital design, particularly human-centred digital design, has the ability to create an inclusive and accessible world and remove a lot of social injustices.

By putting people at the centre of problems, design can create opportunities where people's voices can be heard and addressed. We can then truly empathise and understand the needs of a diverse range of people and start coming up with solutions that benefit all, especially people that are normally underrepresented - such as people with disabilities.

The beautiful thing about design is that it can improve human wellbeing, satisfaction, inclusion, belonging and safety for all people.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

This doesn't have to be the case, depending on the designer/developer/decision maker. If an accessible digital product is created from the very beginning it shouldn't add any cost (or very little additional cost).

However, if there is an additional cost, it will come with a greater return in the following areas:

1. Making things accessible benefits everyone, not just people with disabilities. An accessible/inclusive experience is highly usable, useful and effective for everyone, leading to a better ROI.
2. It is a 100% sensible business practice, by making a digital product accessible/inclusive you immediately open yourself up to a larger audience that would otherwise be excluded.
3. If you don't make a digital product that is accessible, the law will eventually creep up on you and you will have to go back and make it accessible to avoid being fined for an accessibility breach.

A lot of businesses might think "my audience doesn't really have any accessibility needs." But the truth is no matter the size of business or who you think your audience might be, everyone deserves the ability to access and be included.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Our very purpose and Mindly Studio is to create a safe, inclusive and fair world through design. Accessibility is always part of every design decision we make. Aside from practicing inclusive design, we also:

1. Educate our clients on the importance of accessibility.
2. Regularly share educational content on accessibility across our marketing channels to educate and raise awareness - such as guides and articles.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

When we think of access for people with disabilities, we often think of access to the built environment and not the digital environment.

Whilst we acknowledge the importance of access to houses, buildings and public transport, we also need to acknowledge the importance of access to information, communication and technology.

Accessibility standards in digital products are becoming more prominent and enforced. This trend will continue to escalate as more people recognise and understand the importance of accessibility. While the same standards won't apply as the public/built environment, equally rigorous and considerable standards need to exist and be enforced for the digital environment.

Additional note:

Accessibility increases the quality of life for so many people. Imagine not being able to use scissors because you're left-handed. Now imagine not being able to use a website or app because you weren't considered in its design.

We traditionally think of this as being about people with disabilities but accessibility also benefits people that are elderly or have things like a slow internet connection, impaired vision, cultural differences, old-generation devices, etc.



Fernando Heller Vajda

Researcher & Lead UX Designer at Elespacio (elespacio.net)
Barcelona, Spain

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

I'd like to start stating the moral case for accessibility. Regardless of the medium, to provide equitable experience for everyone and don't leave anyone behind is just the right thing to do. Secondly, considering that the average share of customer interactions that are digital have more than doubled since covid-19 and now is over 50% globally, it is reasonable to think that digital design can no longer be neglected in this front. Finally, the digital space is naturally more "malleable". This means that, as technology progresses, it is much more agile and effective to make experiences more accessible in the digital world and have greater impact in societies.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

I think this is a short sighted perspective. To start off, it is possible to design products that simply work for all humans, by applying good design principles that have been already used for many decades, even before digital interfaces. Secondly, to avoid extras costs down the road, designers need to make sure that accessibility features are already embedded in the design system components, so every new page or interface will work from the get go. Third, considering that roughly 1 in 5 people have some kind of disability and most of us will experience some form of it in the future, it seems nonsensical to ignore it from a ROI perspective. Finally, the initial investment to make sure a product will work for everyone is not expensive as managers imagine. Most implementations require very little effort and there are many low hanging fruits that would make a massive impact and that would solve most of the accessibility issues.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

First of all, we take for granted that we will only hire professionals that understand the good design principles that I mentioned before and that will naturally solve many accessible issues. Currently we are also focusing on training. For products that are more complex we consider parenting with external experts, after all they are the specialists and help to make products more accessible on a daily basis. Ultimately we aim to embed (more) accessibility in our company culture. Last but not least, I'm proud to say that, because of our hiring process and culture, we are simply a bunch of nice and empathic people that will naturally make sure everyone can access what we design.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

Absolutely! There are already many initiatives in this direction. From a legal perspective, there are for example the UK Equality and the EU Accessibility Acts. Commercially, "digital public spaces" that have low accessibility standards, in most cases without realising, are already suffering reputational damage, lowering brand equity and missing the chance to build loyalty with a huge customer segment. Also, search engines (SEO) already favour websites that have higher accessibility standards in their results.



Amber Meadows

Senior Designer at Foolproof
London, United Kingdom

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

As we move into a more digitally augmented chapter of humanity - with everyday things from work, to food deliveries and education all digitised, design sets the tone and moves the needle forward, and it's the momentum from this forward direction that ought to power inclusive experiences for all. It is not the responsibility of one person, but everyone (digital design agencies included) to do so. The more are involved the more embedded accessibility will be within our digital lives.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

When costing out timelines for design, there may be additional time spent ensuring the product is accessible to all. However, the upfront cost is nothing compared to the fines a company may face if they failed an audit and are found to exclude certain demographics, as well as the customers they may lose out on to competitors that do in fact meet their needs.

More accessible designs means more people can access and use a product and/or service, so while it may be an initial added investment of time, it translates to more users/sales in the end.

If the product isn't accessible I'd argue that it isn't complete and shouldn't have been delivered. It may require more effort to build a product to a certain standard, but having an accessible product can increase your return in the long term, given it's going to be available to more people. The costs an organisation can face if they are found to be in breach of accessibility standards will likely outweigh any costs saved from corner-cutting done during the build.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Since our inception in 2002, we've been champions of accessible design, having always placed users and their needs first. Our internal team of recruitment experts ensure we're speaking to as wide an array of people as possible, and in accordance with project scope too. We've also lots of thinking on the topic, and often write on how to improve inclusive and accessible means of design such as Getting started with inclusive design and Towards more diverse research options, most recently.

The number one thing that any company could do right now is ensure their internal team is representative of the world they're serving or designing for in our case. Without inclusive hiring practices, companies are destined to design experiences which may not have been considered from the perspective of a specific demographic and risk discriminating lots of people.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

Absolutely, if not by more aggressive standards. Public places have physical limitations which can mean a website is the only avenue for a user's end goal. If a website is the last resort, it has to be accessible to all.



Malte Muth

Team Lead Web Engineering at Experience One
Berlin, Germany

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

Digital Design defines how we perceive, navigate and interact with digital content. By removing geographical barriers and rendering services wherever you are, the advent of digital services has already made content more accessible per se. The next barriers that need removal are related to physical, mental, and economic ability – which needs a re-thinking on how, or more precisely, for whom we are designing.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

While Inclusive Design might mean a higher up-front design cost, it is more expensive to “retrofit” accessibility to existing systems without changing the principal design. Any consumer can develop a disability at any time, so lack of accessibility leads to the loss of consumers. Accessibility, on the other hand, increases the target audience and reduces the cost of user retention. Inclusive Design is in many cases an exercise in achieving more by doing less – and therefore, Inclusive Design can be a cost-saver in and of itself! The general association between Inclusive Design and higher cost is a misconception.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Accessibility is usually viewed as a costly, optional effort and therefore sometimes not part of the briefing. The topic then comes up during audits or when regulations get updated, necessitating a re-design as well as a re-work of site content. We’re actively working on steering our customers from this cost trap by stressing that accessibility is a continuous, holistic effort, and should be a consideration on the same level as SEO.

Websites are public, so shouldn’t they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

When thinking about the accessibility of public places, my mind automatically goes to metro/subway stations. If you’re relying on a wheelchair for mobility, have a baby stroller, or walking on crutches, you’re dependent on using escalators, ramps, or elevators – which are more often than not in a very different place from the “normal” entries and exits. Not only does that mean that you are provided with a very different path to or from public transport, but it also means that you’re having a different experience: Elevators can be crowded, escalators can be out-of-service and ramps can become unsafe to use in wet or cold conditions. I think it is safe to say that public places that are accessible by regulation, but not inclusive at all, are abundant. Websites can and should avoid these approaches: users shouldn’t have to “switch to an accessible version” of a page; navigation has to be accessible for everyone. Making a website accessible is way easier than redesigning a metro station and should, therefore, be held to higher standards. If Inclusive Design is used from the very first moment, you will never need to build anything “extra”.

Additional note:

Back when smartphones became commercially available, every website was barely accessible to smartphone users – so mobile websites were needed. When tablets came around, the same process started again. I vividly remember meetings discussing “Do we need a mobile site?” or “How does this pay off?”. Today, everybody is smarter and there is no question that you do a mobile-first design – except in very specific, thought-out cases. I do see the same discussion happening now when it comes to accessibility, and I do predict that in the future, accessible-by-default will be the standard.

To stay with the example of the mobile design: Since small buttons are hard to tap with your fingers, mobile design relies on larger buttons and more spacing between interactive elements. But this also makes buttons easier to click with a computer mouse – so it stuck, and gone were the days of tiny buttons and links everywhere (what were we thinking?). Inclusive Design also gives us across-the-board improvements: If your text is less complex to be understandable for non-native speakers, it becomes easier to understand for everybody. When your graphics have higher contrast for people with impaired vision, they become easier to perceive for everybody. If your website consumes less data for users with a limited or metered internet connection, it saves costs for everybody.



Kurt Roberts

Chief Experience Officer at Goodbeast
Portland, United States

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

Our primary - and sometimes only - means of accessing many of the services and products we use are digital interfaces. It's how we buy things, pay our bills, order food, register to vote, and connect with each other, and new uses are getting digital-first interfaces every day. Accessible design is essential to ensuring that everyone has access to these interfaces.

Developing accessible technologies is a moral choice. We believe it is critical for the things we design and build to be usable by everyone, regardless of the browsing/assistive technology used or any other limitations that the user might face. We're actively rejecting the idea that it's okay to build inequality into the system.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

If you consider it an option to build an inaccessible product, it's certainly possible to cut costs in this area. But designing and building accessible products isn't a difficult process. Doing that work has other benefits - more accessible, well-structured code tends to perform better with search engines. Most importantly, your work can be used by the largest number of people, maximizing your potential return on investment.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

We've standardized our quality processes to account for accessibility testing at every stage of design and development. The design needs to be tested first. For example, we test contrast levels and color-blindness safety while the design is still in a prototyping tool - we don't want to build the page and find out the page is inaccessible during testing. We put a lot of effort into the early stages of making something so that we've thought through all the accessibility issues thoroughly. We do this by testing, using online tools to solicit feedback and in-person usability labs.

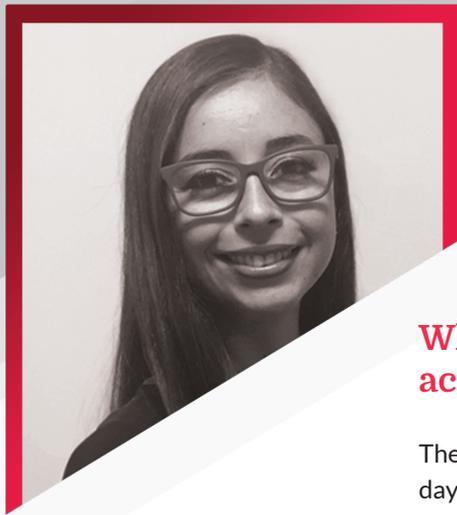
Working this way has enormous benefits - it ultimately saves developers time because it requires more planning than just figuring out what the product will look like; it requires that we deeply understand how it will be used in many different contexts in order to build it correctly and therefore reduces surprises late in the process.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

Absolutely. Public places are required to be accessible to everyone under the law. The Americans with Disabilities Act imposes accessibility requirements on public spaces and businesses. We should hold websites to the same standards. A well-constructed, inclusive site should be the goal of all companies, nonprofits, and organizations.

Standards and regulations are essential to make that happen. The ADA is credited with causing substantial gains in improving accessibility in real-world environments (for example, auditory prompts to pedestrian traffic signals and curb cutouts to aid transitions from sidewalks to streets). Similar improvements are possible in the online environment.

Design is a challenge - it's a way of looking at constraints and finding a solution that fits them and creates something new at the same time. When we design with constraints about accessibility in mind, we create better end products.



Alexandra Terán

Operational Director at Ariadna Communications Group
Quito, Ecuador

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

The digital ecosystem has been growing year by year, gaining more and more ground every day, however thanks to the pandemic that forced us all to digitise faster, it was detected that digital inclusivity is not on the radar of companies.

Just as there is an investment in the physical adaptation of commercial premises to make them more accessible, the same importance should be placed on investing in inclusive apps and websites that facilitate navigation for people with disabilities.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

I don't think it's more expensive, but it's definitely an additional investment that companies don't consider. Any development has a cost, making it inclusive should be an extra amount that should not be considered an expense but an investment, the vision should be to invest in your potential customers.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Small proposals have been made to our clients that have not yet been approved, a special one to help people with colour blindness to drive their vehicles more safely. It has also been proposed to include a sign language translator in all video developments and to develop fact sheets and brochures in Braille.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

They should be, but there is no governmental entity to regulate these standards, unlike physical places where they can be fined for non-compliance. But they should not wait until there is a threat of a fine to think about that percentage of society that is not getting access to 100% of the information they need.

Additional note:

A few years ago I had the opportunity to lead the automotive sales area for people with disabilities for the Hyundai brand in Ecuador and it was one of the most enriching experiences of my career, the idea of now being able to take that same enthusiasm towards developments and contributions that we could make from an advertising agency that handles important clients, excites me greatly.



Yohji Alexander Kanki

Founder at Gohan Strategy
Singapore, Singapore

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

Digital Design like most tasks that can be created on a computer or tablet are barrier free, so even people with mental or physical disabilities can appear equal. Since branding and personal branding will drive the success of your online presence, there will be no room for discrimination. Taking the conversation to the level of Web3, I believe that at that point, all barriers will be overcome, in terms of anyone able to act as they want to in a metaverse kind of scenario.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

It is more expensive at the very start, but with proper planning in the beginning you might even be able to include the process for this audience so that you end up with a much more holistic product that reaches more people and therefore equals out the initial investment. We also work with Webflow, which offers great flexibility towards browser and location based settings so that our staff and customers can access everything according to their own preferences.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Our agency Gohan Strategy has never looked at peoples physical conditions and only focuses on mindset and passion when it comes to a strong asset for the team. For the Design part, we created a very detailed Logo and identity design process that identifies customer groups into age, personalities and even accessibility status, so that we check all our presented deliverables on common concerns like WCAG 2_0 AAA & Color Blindness, etc., to ensure that every user gets the same experience.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

I believe that Websites are the front doors of brands online, meaning that if they're not accessible for everyone who should be interested, that is a problem with the brand's strategy and core values. If you believe that everyone should have access, you as an entity need to ensure that everyone does. I believe that in good technology partnership, and strong browsers like Chrome, Safari and Opera, are able to save presets and display information accordingly will provide everyone with a minimum level of access to all content and information online. (such as translation tools, Online Reading tools, Speech recognition etc.)

Additional note:

Happy to see that more people take this seriously and keep all societies in mind while designing and building meaningful brands worldwide.

Writing and thinking about this made me realize how we as Gohan Strategy can also do more to support and be more mindful in general.



Jay Eckert, R.G.D., C.G.D

Founder + Creative Director at Parachute Design
Toronto, Canada

What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

Digital design plays a very significant role in the accessibility of our society and will surely continue to become more important as technology continues to weave itself into different aspects of our day-to-day lives. Accessibility has been in the spotlight for some time now and promotes basic human rights – whether it be related to a high contrast website design for the visually impaired or wayfinding systems in public places. The more emphasis we put on making everything we create accessible, the better closer our society gets to providing equal rights and opportunities to all.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

In some cases, yes, I would agree if the compliance needs for a particular project were significantly beyond what is considered the industry standard for (ex. WCAG 2.2). Sometimes compromises need to be made in terms of design or functionality, and sometimes meeting some levels of accessibility compliance requires significant changes to the way something is built – but that's only because we're only now truly focusing on accessibility as an industry. It takes time to change our habits and creative methods we've been using for years and to adapt them to a methodology that is more efficient at meeting accessibility benchmarks. Our approach at Parachute has always been to incorporate new methods and techniques into our creative design and development process as we learn more about the changes in the field so that they become the standard way of doing things.

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Yes, it's been an evolution in our design and development workflow for a few years now. With the onset of AODA we took the opportunity to become authorities on the subject and begin working as many best practices into our routines and way of thinking to make subtle changes along the way with each and every project. We also recommend the use of AI-guided applications that run on our clients' websites to continually monitor accessibility benchmarks.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

Yes, absolutely. We're certainly on that path over the last few years I believe. There are still thresholds for smaller businesses to avoid meeting compliance with their websites, but I suspect as accessibility continues to become the normal way of thinking, those thresholds will begin to shrink. Change takes time and we've only just begun.



Matt Gibson

Chief Commercial Officer at Cyber-Duck
London, United Kingdom



What role does digital design play in creating more accessible societies for all?

I'd argue without digital design, it's impossible to create a truly inclusive, accessible society in 2022. Any theoretical sharp dividing line between 'IRL' and 'online' has largely dissolved. Digital has extended into how we practically do everything, whether that's voting, vaccinating, shopping, travelling, or otherwise; many products and services are now only available through digital channels. In this world, an inaccessible website or app is exactly the same as a building with no ramp or lift, it excludes people - whether by design or simple thoughtlessness. Hybrid and remote working and events were always possible to help those excluded due to disability or caring requirements; Their rapid adoption in the pandemic highlighted how it's really a matter of will, to rethink how we organise and design an inclusive society and services, rather than any technical barriers or solutions.

So really, the underlying question is of how digital design fits into the broader scope of service design. Taking a step back at what any product or service is trying to achieve and making the commitment at the outset to include people of all ages, abilities, literacy levels and more, and then designing from the ground up, integrating digital into that broader product or service design. Examining every user touchpoint to ask; is it necessary, is it excluding anyone. Then using digital design as a tool to deliver the best user experience possible, whether a simple ecommerce website, or a complicated service ecosystem, like the Dart Charge crossing we work on with Highways England. It's not easy and approximately 99% of websites currently fail basic web accessibility standards, but delivering inclusive digital design is a state of mind. And it's a must if all are to benefit from and participate in society today.

There is this idea that building an inclusive/accessible digital product is more expensive, what do you think?

First, accessibility shouldn't be treated as something that can be opted out of, as if it's an inconvenience. Second, it's a misconception that accessible things are more expensive. What is expensive anyway? Is it really expensive to design something that as many customers as possible will enjoy using? It's a matter of perspective. If I said to you, tomorrow I could increase your audience and revenues by 20%, you'd bite my arm off at the chance. By having an inaccessible, non-user-friendly digital product, you could be losing 20% or more of your audience who have disabilities at the outset. Viewed with this mindset, accessibility is not an extra expense but an opportunity to reach more customers and add value. Tesco famously back in 2001 created a separate version of their website, Tesco Access, that ended up generating more revenues than the main inaccessible one, and so ended up integrating the two together. Superficially, there is potentially a matter of extra design cost, but this is largely incurred if you don't factor in accessibility from the start of the design process, and then try to engineer it in at the end. And there's no guarantee that the more inaccessible a product is, the cheaper it is, there's plenty of inaccessible digital products that have had vast amounts of budget thrown at them. With an increasing focus on regulating for accessibility and a rightful push from users whether via lawsuits in the US or wider social pressure, accessibility should be viewed a basic part of doing business, just like having your business practices checked out by lawyers (e.g. for GDPR compliance).

Has your agency taken any steps towards accessible design?

Cyber-Duck made the decision well over a decade ago, as a pioneering UX digital design agency to focus on making accessible websites, on both a moral and user-centred basis: we simply wanted to create great digital products all people

Matt Gibson

Chief Commercial Officer at Cyber-Duck
London, United Kingdom

could easily use and enjoy. In the past five years, our work with some of the UK's largest public sector organisations like the Cabinet Office, the NHS and Sport England has deepened and broadened this commitment. Accessibility is not a checklist approach for us, it's a lens through which we see usability and so it's baked into our end-to-end design and development process. Right from the outset at research stage, we focus on ensuring representation of different, diverse user groups, including disabilities and carry this through into testing and (re)iteration. We have a certified ISO-9001 Quality Management System to ensure continuous improvement; and we include accessibility non-conformities in the same way we would include technical non-conformities.

We believe designing inclusive, accessible digital products starts from the inside out, from having a culture and company that is inclusive and empowering. We have a dedicated Diversity & Inclusion Lead, former British Paralympian and Blind entrepreneur, Yahye Siyad, who we first met when he tested PDF accessibility for a project we were working on. He works with our Inclusion & Accessibility working group which goes across the business from HR and project management to UI designers and developers; running RNIB's broad-based accessibility training for the entire company to embed these principles in everything we do. From an external perspective, we're members of IAPP, the International Association of Accessibility Professionals, with the aim of certifying our designers and developers in accessibility best practice. We are also deeply involved with #A11y community at large; evangelising for accessibility and inclusion with our popular webinar series and talking on the issue with major digital industry voices like BIMA and The Drum.

Websites are public, so shouldn't they be measured by the same accessibility standards as public places?

This all depends what you mean by accessibility standards. Should websites be accessible? Yes. Just as buildings have to have certain things to be considered accessibility compliant, it should be no different from websites and WCAG guidelines, whether compelled by regulation or not. But accessibility standards compliance, whether for physical or digital experiences, are just a basic starting point. Something can be technically accessible and still be an incredibly poor user experience that won't retain users or customers. Going beyond compliance into great usability provides competitive advantage and attracts and retains people into using your product or services again and again. In the physical world, as a new parent using a buggy, the difference between John Lewis' great changing facilities, feeding rooms and well-trained staff, compared to a shop that has a single disabled toilet with a baby change table set over a dirty loo is vast. And the same is true for the digital world. There is a big difference between opening a door – accessibility compliance – and actively welcoming people in – inclusion. And the value added to a brand or business by doing the latter can be immense.

Additional note:

At Cyber-Duck, the evidence for delivering accessible, inclusive digital experiences is patently clear: it opens up any organisation to the broadest possible audience. On every business metric it delivers value. So, if you're not trying to deliver that, at best you're passively deciding to exclude people from the products and services you design. For us, that's simply unacceptable.

Accessibility often seems hard; it can generate headlines when you get it wrong. And there are no quick fixes. Despite what some companies claim, you can't fix your accessibility problems with technology like overlays, and certainly not the broader issues of inclusion such as people having poor literacy or only able to afford limited data to access websites through their mobiles. Human problems need human solutions. You can't necessarily be 100% inclusive from the word go, but you can be 100% intentional to do the right thing and to keep improving on all fronts.

— Thank you for your participation

It was stimulating to see how multi-cultured and diverse agencies are doing to create more inclusive and accessible societies for all of the people. Moving forward from this report there are certain important questions that we should ask ourselves to continue down this path:

- Does accessible really mean inclusive?
- Having read the different measures agencies have taken to tackle their accessibility issues, what can we as individuals do?
- What about from an industry point of view?
- How do we balance what the client wishes and our accessibility standards?
- Do we have a concrete agency strategy to address accessibility?
- Are we taking into consideration and including, the main actors (people with disabilities), in our thinking process and solutions.

Thank you once again to all of the participants for taking the time to share their experiences and knowledge and for sharing what has been done and what is yet to come.

Be a part of the change.

#Accessibility #Inclusion #AccessibilityForAll

— “ **Accessible and inclusive web design gives us the opportunity to build better and fairer societies for everyone, and it starts by changing our mindset.** ”

#Accessibility #Inclusion #AccessibilityForAll



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