

Accessibility and the Internet

Indiana Institute on Disability and Community

The Internet is an important part of any organization's engagement strategy. Websites offer chances to learn about an organization's offerings and services, engage with their staff, or purchase products. However, for many people with disabilities, the Internet is inaccessible. This is despite the fact that the Americans with Disabilities Act has designated that websites must be accessible, in the same way it mandates that physical spaces and programming be accessible. It is also the right thing to do – an inaccessible website can affect the way that people with disabilities engage with the world in the same way that the lack of a ramp, braille signage, or captioning can affect their ability to engage with a physical space. Making sure on-line communication is accessible is incredibly important, and with recent settlements in a major ADA lawsuit, it is now more important than ever to ensure your website is accessible.

The Case: Murphy V. Eyebobs

Recently, the federal ADA lawsuit Murphy Vs. Eyebobs was settled. The case was one of the closely watched cases related to accessibility widgets and their use on websites, as people with disabilities have been saying that they do not promote access for years. This case's settlement has resulted in Eyebobs having to appoint an "Accessibility Coordination Team," develop an accessibility policy statement, implement an accessibility strategy, and provide accessibility training to staff. These are all things that should have been done prior to the case being tried in the first place. The settlement also states that Eyebobs is to bring on an accessibility consultant to help make the site compliant, as well as to ensure that apps and any third-party content are accessible.

What Does It Mean?

This settlement provides a unique look into the practices that make a website accessible to the standards of the law. For your organizations, it provides some guidance on steps you can take to make your website more accessible.

Overlays

The first is to not rely on an external overlay, or a service that promises that one line of code or a simple addition to your website will help make things more accessible by providing software that can change the output of the website. Often, they can make the website less accessible, not more, and many are incompatible with assistive technology used by people with disabilities.

Capacity Building

The second is to develop internal capacity and ensure that staff are trained on the needs of people with disabilities, to help make supporting their needs an active part of your organization's culture, not a box to be checked. This needs to be more than just those who have a public-facing role – websites are created by your IT staff or contractors, and the final decisions are made by your executive teams. Having every member of your staff be involved in building internal capacity for accessibility doesn't just help with website accessibility, it helps make your organization welcoming for people with disabilities.



Accessibility and the Internet

Indiana Institute on Disability and Community

Accessibility Audits

The third, and most technical, is to conduct a website accessibility audit and continue to ensure that your website is accessible. There are many tools that can help with this essential quality assurance and compliance check. One of the most useful is the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Functional Accessibility Checker tool](#). This free tool helps analyze code issues in your website and shares where the issues lie within the code itself. However, most tools of this type are limited, and provide merely a starting ground. If your organization lacks the internal expertise to resolve the resulting code issues, a consulting firm should be engaged to ensure website accessibility is provided. Some of these firms may be linked to local non-profit organizations, many of whom have experience in disability.

Considering firms who are run by or employ people with disabilities can also help ensure that your website is accessible to the real-world experiences of people with disabilities. Auditing accessibility with external groups is just as important as auditing your finances with external groups – it can be very easy to say that something is a minor issue, when the reality is it can massively impact the way someone engages with your website.



Links and Leaving the Website

Fourth, and finally, ensure that your website's external links are accessible. You are not just responsible for the accessibility of the website you provide but ensuring that any website you have linked to is accessible. You need to ensure that any links to external content result in accessible external content. For example, the website for a shop that sells your organizations' merchandise should also be built in an accessible way and should also refrain from using accessibility overlays. If you have a good working relationship with any linked organization that your visitors might engage with through your website, especially if they are a web store, communicate to that organization that their content must also be accessible and if they are unwilling to do so, find a new partner. If you do not have contact with an organization you link to or cannot otherwise verify the accessibility of that external link, the best practice is to remove the link or to make a new contact to ensure access.

Conclusion

The Internet has the ability to bring people together. For people with disabilities, however, much of the history of this powerful tool has created a "digital divide." Making sure that your website is accessible is not only the law, but most of all, it's the right thing to do. Putting in the time and effort to make sure your website is accessible will help make the world a more inclusive, welcoming place.