

Issue 6: Sharing the Benefits of Technology



**ASSOCIATION OF
BLIND CITIZENS OF
NEW ZEALAND INC**

Supplement to “The Great Barrier Brief”

Is Your Website Reaching Everyone?

Blind People Speaking for Ourselves

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**Is Your Website
Reaching Everyone?**

Founded in 1945, the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc (Association) is New Zealand’s leading blindness consumer organisation and one of the country’s largest organisations of disabled consumers. The Association’s aim is to heighten awareness of the rights of blind and vision impaired people and to remove the barriers that impact upon our ability to live in an accessible, equitable and inclusive society.

In the context of this document, the word “blind” encompasses all those with a vision impairment who can identify with some or all of the issues described below.

INTRODUCTION

As blind people, we are unable to communicate and access information visually, and we may also be restricted in our ability to get out and about. The World Wide Web (with the use of adaptive technologies) has opened many doors for us, allowing us to access the same information and carry out transactions independently in the same way as our sighted peers. It is particularly empowering to at last live in a world in which we can read our daily news, interact with others, do our shopping, pay our bills, manage our finances, apply for services and do many other things online with full independence.

Well designed websites make life better for everyone; however they can be particularly beneficial for people who are blind as we can access the same information with full independence and without being marked out as in any way different from everyone else. Some disabilities (such as deafblindness) can severely restrict a person's ability to access information and interact socially; for these people, properly designed websites can actually be life changing, providing a means to communicate and interact with others, and such websites may be the only means these people have for accessing everyday printed information.

Unfortunately, the reality of our experience with many websites is more frustration than liberation. Too often we find websites that are not accessible.

New Zealand should follow the lead of numerous other countries and adopt specific legislation to uphold the rights of disabled people to equitable access to websites and online information. In the meantime, under the Human Rights Act 1993, any organisation, commercial or non-commercial, when it provides goods and/or services, is obliged to take reasonable steps to avoid discriminating on the grounds of disability. Nowadays the fundamental language of the web, HTML, has developed to the point where developers can easily and efficiently create websites that deliver a rich and productive experience for everyone including disabled people.

This statement is directed primarily at web developers, because their clients rely on them to understand the technology and know how to apply it to meet their needs. Developers must recognise that in most cases their clients are legally obliged to serve all members of the public without discrimination. It follows that developers have an obligation on behalf of their clients to know how to correctly apply today's web technology to create websites that serve everyone, including disabled people.

What We Need

We need all websites that provide services and information to the public to comply with level AA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) as published by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The following list of areas of compliance is not exhaustive but should be seen as representing perhaps the most significant barriers we typically face with current websites:

- Images to be properly described by use of the alt text tag
- All web controls such as Edit, check and combo boxes, and buttons etc properly labelled with their associated names
- Good and consistent use of headings and place markers to clearly indicate the structure of web pages
- Proper use of tables to display data in an organised manner
- If technologies other than HTML are used, these must also be accessible, or the same information and services must be provided through an additional means which complies with the WCAG
- If anti-abuse solutions such as CAPTCHA are to be used to verify someone as human, these must not discriminate against those who cannot see an image, hear garbled audio, or who use braille for their primary method of communication
- The ability to adjust colour, background and contrast

WHY THESE ARE NEEDED

The World Wide Web Consortium is not only responsible for developing the fundamental language of the web, HTML, but is committed to the principle that the web is for everyone. The language of the web, as it exists today, has numerous features for producing a rich, enjoyable and productive experience for everyone, while at the same time ensuring accessibility and usability for disabled people. The commitment by the W3C to open standards upholds the principle that the web is for everyone, and ensures the widest possible range of adaptive technology is available to help disabled people use the web. The W3C has developed the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) as well as a number of statements of best practice to help developers create websites everyone can use.

Websites that comply with these guidelines not only look and feel good to the public in general, but they allow adaptive technologies (such as a screen reader or braille display) to access the information on a site, providing feedback to the user via synthetic speech or braille. This allows blind and vision impaired people to independently access a website and interact with it.

In fact, complying with the guidelines benefits everyone because such websites will be more usable to a wider range of people. A well designed website that complies with the guidelines can vastly increase your potential customer base by enabling access by a wider range of consumers.

Content management systems and other web publishing tools can dramatically improve efficiency when building websites. Such tools should only be used if they facilitate the creation of websites that comply with the WCAG. But if you use the appropriate tools, this will not only improve your efficiency as a developer, but they can help ensure your websites will be fully accessible with little extra effort on your part.

FOR FURTHER ASSISTANCE

Web technology continues to rapidly evolve. Please contact us if you need further assistance and we can refer you to more detailed resources to help ensure your websites meet the WCAG.

REFERENCE SOURCES

- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, World Wide Web Consortium, available at <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20>
- New Zealand Government Web Standards 2.0, available at <http://www.webstandards.govt.nz/>
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Article 9, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006, ratified by New Zealand, October 2008

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National Office

Ground Floor, 113 Adelaide Road, Newtown, Wellington

PO Box 7144, Newtown, Wellington 6242

Phone: 04-389-0033 or 0800-222-694 (ABC NZ Inc)

Fax: 04-389-0030

Website: abcnz.org.nz

Email: enquiries@abcnz.org.nz