
Digital Accessibility as an Essential Element of an Inclusive Organization

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Abstract:

Purpose: The article aims to validate the importance of enhancing digital accessibility in organizations from both business and social perspectives. Initially, it sets the context by discussing the legal aspects of digital accessibility.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Following this, it reviews previous research to analyze the current state of digital accessibility in organizations. This analysis identifies the problems, difficulties, and challenges that companies face in this area, and formulates a business case for activities related to accessibility.

Findings: The article concludes with recommendations, emphasizing the need to further increase awareness of digital accessibility. It also provides guidelines for organizations on actions that can enhance inclusivity.

Practical Implications: This article delves into the critical issue of digital accessibility within the information society, emphasizing the need for equal access to digital content for people with disabilities. It highlights that digital accessibility is not only a legal obligation, particularly for public institutions, but also a matter of social responsibility and business ethics.

Originality/Value: Recommendations that encourage companies to expand accessibility, driven by an increasingly compelling business case.

Keywords: Digital accessibility, inclusiveness, information society, equality of access.

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1. Introduction

Today's world is increasingly discussing accessibility, which affects society's quality of life. Accessibility means that a product or service has been designed or modified so that everyone, regardless of ability or disability, can use it without barriers or impediments. Accessibility is essential to creating an inclusive and equitable society in which everyone has equal opportunities to participate fully. Ensuring every citizen has physical and digital access to products and services is critical to promoting social inclusion and equal opportunity.

The most common limitations resulting in exclusion include those related to visual dysfunction, hearing impairments, mobility limitations, intellectual disabilities, transitional disabilities, and those that appear (and unfortunately progress) with the ageing process.

According to World Health Organization estimates, 1.3 billion people worldwide experience significant disability (WHO, 2023). In the United States, more than 28% of adults have some disability (DHDS, 2024). The situation is similar in the European Union, where in 2022, one in four residents over the age of 16 experienced some form of disability.

According to Eurostat estimates, this includes 101 million people in the EU (ETO, 2023). In Poland, there are more than 3 million people with disabilities who have legal confirmation of disability. Considering people without official certificates but with severe limitations in performing daily activities, it is estimated that this could be a group of more than 8 million people (GUS, 2021).

People with disabilities very often experience mistreatment or unfair treatment. According to a Eurobarometer survey, 52% of people with disabilities feel discriminated against (Kiwnik Pargana, 2019). The reason for this is the various challenges that such people have to deal with and for whom they are a much bigger problem than for people without disabilities. The most common to overcome are:

- economic barriers related to the lack of material resources to cover the cost of adapting the environment to one's needs,
- architectural barriers resulting from the unsuitability of public spaces,
- educational barriers related to the lack of an inclusive education system and appropriate teaching methods and tools,
- psychological barriers resulting from prejudices and stereotypes in society about people with a particular disease or disability,
- cultural, attitude-related barriers, i.e., all judgments, prejudices and stereotypes, stemming, for example, from the belief that only people with good health and attractive appearance achieve success,
- social barriers that result in social exclusion, alienation and estrangement,

- and becoming increasingly important, communication barriers are primarily due to digital inaccessibility, which involves mismatched communication methods and a lack of access to information.

This article focuses precisely on the latter issue, i.e., on the role and importance of digital accessibility in the ever-evolving information society, understood as making digital content available so that people with disabilities have the same access to it as everyone else.

Digital accessibility is becoming an essential part of managing a modern organization. It is not only a legal requirement (as in the case of public institutions) but primarily a matter of social responsibility and business ethics.

The article aims to demonstrate the validity of measures to improve digital accessibility in organizations, both from a business and social point of view. The first part introduces the context of digital accessibility and discusses related legal aspects. In the next part of the article, based on a review of previous research, an analysis of the current state of digital accessibility in organizations was made.

This made it possible to identify problems, difficulties and challenges faced by companies in this area, and to formulate a business case for accessibility-related activities. The article concludes with conclusions and recommendations.

2. The Idea of Digital Accessibility

Digital accessibility is a relatively new concept that poses a challenge for organizations, especially public entities, where these issues are regulated by law. Digital accessibility means that websites, mobile applications and electronic documents are designed so that people with various disabilities (e.g., visual, auditory, motor, intellectual, due to age or illness) can use them without hindrance.

The origins of digital accessibility efforts date back to the 1990s. That is when the first initiatives emerged to consider the needs of people with disabilities in web design. The World Wide Web Consortium (<https://www.w3.org/>) is a pioneer. This organization developed the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), a set of fundamental guidelines in the area of digital accessibility.

The WCAG standard is based on four main principles, permeability, functionality, comprehensibility, and robustness. Within each principle, 13 guidelines - detailed instructions on how to meet each principle, have been formulated, with testable success criteria at three levels, A, AA, and AAA. WCAG is a technical standard and a tool to help create a more inclusive digital environment for all users (WCAG 2.1, 2023).

Also crucial in the context of accessibility (including digital accessibility) is *universal design*. According to Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006, p. 4), universal design should be understood as "the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."

The concept thus boils down to providing universal solutions (i.e., websites, applications, for example) available to any potential audience from the beginning without the need for constant adaptation. Thus, universal design promotes equal and equitable access to goods and services, considering the needs of those users whose functioning is limited in some aspect.

Leading countries in the field of digital accessibility include the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Norway and Switzerland. These countries have introduced regulations and run educational campaigns to raise awareness of the issue and improve the accessibility of their websites and mobile applications. The United States has the most extended history of promoting digital accessibility. Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (1973) requires that all electronic and information technologies of the federal government be accessible to people with disabilities.

Moreover, in 1990, President George Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), which prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities, which also means ensuring their inclusion in society by all means.

The Act encourages private corporations and public institutions to follow and guarantee accessibility guidelines, ensuring that this group can be economically, politically, socially and educationally integrated. On April 24, 2024, the Law was updated with specific requirements for ensuring the digital accessibility of online content and applications.

The European Union is also one of the leaders in accessibility. It is working on several issues to foster Europe's digital future (RUE, 2024). Acts of international law apply in EU countries (including Poland), among which the key ones are the already mentioned Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Directive 2016/2102 of the European Parliament and of the Council (EU) of October 26, 2016, on the accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies (Dz.U.UE, 2016), and Directive 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council (EU) of April 17, 2019 on accessibility requirements for products and services, the so-called European Accessibility Act (EAA) (Dz.U.UE, 2019).

In Poland, the Sejm, on April 26, 2024, passed the Law on Ensuring that Business Entities Meet Accessibility Requirements for Certain Products and Services (Dz.U. 2024 poz. 731, 2024), which transposed the European Accessibility Act into Polish law. The provisions of the Act will come into force on June 28, 2025. As of that date, businesses should market products that meet accessibility requirements and offer and

provide accessible services by the provisions of the Act. Another Polish legal act that addresses digital accessibility is the Act of April 4, 2019, on Digital Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Entities (Dz.U. 2019 poz. 848, 2019).

3. Digital Accessibility in the Practice of Organizations

The growing importance of digital accessibility and its impact on an organization's operations is generating increasing interest among researchers and practitioners in these issues. The following reviews the most relevant results from research conducted in recent years.

In 2021, the WebAIM (Web Accessibility in Mind) association at Utah State University's Institute for Disability Research, Policy and Practice surveyed a group of 758 digital accessibility practitioners in different regions of the world, with respondents from North America (62.8%) and Europe (25.6%) dominating (WebAIM, 2021). A picture of the accessibility specialist emerges from the survey.

The number of women in the sample was five times higher than in a survey conducted by the same organization among web developers, where women accounted for only 8% (WebAIM, 2020). The average age of accessibility specialists was also significantly higher: more than 37% were 45 years and older, while in the survey of web designers only 8.9% of respondents were in this age range.

The accessibility specialists surveyed appeared highly educated: more than 84% of respondents had at least a college degree. Nearly 30% of respondents reported having a disability. More than 60% of respondents were employees of corporations, 12% of educational institutions, and 11% of government entities. 90% were well-established organizations, operating in the market for at least five years.

Nearly 48% of respondents were employed as a web accessibility expert/consultant/leader. At the same time, the remainder combined the role of accessibility specialist with another function, most often developer (25.7%), designer (5.4%), project manager (5%), tester (4.2%) and content specialist (3.2%).

More than 22% of respondents have been actively implementing accessibility for more than 12 years, and 24% two years or less. The average salary of surveyed web accessibility specialists was significantly higher than that of surveyed web developers. Nearly 53% of surveyed digital accessibility specialists described their level of competence in this area as very high, and 71.8% declared excellent knowledge of WCAG standards.

According to almost 57% of respondents, web content has become more accessible over the past year, 40.6% did not notice any changes, and in the opinion of 13%, accessibility has decreased. Only 10% of respondents saw improved access to content due to better assistive technology and browsers, while 90% pointed to the

need for more accessible websites. Fewer than 52.6% of respondents felt that their organization's online products were easily accessible.

It should be noted that although accessibility in a company should be the responsibility of the entire team, from developers creating accessible products, to the HR team promoting an accessibility culture internally, to marketing communications with customers, more and more companies are hiring accessibility experts.

Such experts are usually responsible for diagnosing what needs to be done in a company to make it more accessible. Their area of expertise is to recognize what, and then how, to improve in the company's processes, products, services and policies.

The main tasks of digital accessibility experts include identifying bottlenecks in the online experience of customers and employees and suggesting improvements, such as software and initiatives, that can be beneficial. They are also responsible for developing tools to promote digital accessibility, such as assistive technologies (Gala, 2024b).

Equally interesting are the results of another survey, "Attitudes to Digital Accessibility," to understand how digital accessibility is changing in organizations. This is an annual survey, conducted by Open Inclusion since 2021 (AbilityNet's, 2023). The 2023 survey included 363 digital professionals, mainly from the UK (66%), the US and Canada (21%) and other European countries (8%). Almost 70% of respondents worked in large organizations (with 250 or more employees). Mainly, these were public institutions, such as government agencies, health care or education (40%), commercial companies (34%) and non-profit organizations (22%).

The survey results indicate a noticeable divide between organizations strongly committed to accessibility and those lagging far behind. The former have a broader diversity and inclusion strategy, digital accessibility is one of their priorities, they invest in the necessary resources and leadership, and they have a digital accessibility program leader within their ranks.

51% of the organizations identified as accessibility leaders were from the for-profit business sector, 22% operated in the public sector, and the same number were in the non-profit sector. Among the organizations classified by the researchers as "sluggish" in implementing accessibility, 45% were from the public sector, 33% from the commercial sector, and 16% from the non-profit sector.

The survey questionnaire focused on five key areas: vision, leadership, capabilities, processes, and procurement of services and products. The following are the key findings from the survey of these aspects:

- Views on the organization's vision were divided. 39% of respondents agreed (strongly or slightly) with the statement "My organization has a clear vision for digital accessibility," while 42% disagreed (the remainder did not explicitly state their opinion). 42% of respondents said their organizations have an up-to-date digital accessibility statement on their website.
- Ideally, digital accessibility requires prominence and accountability at a higher level in the organization. Unfortunately, the survey revealed a need for more leadership in this area. 38% of respondents said there was no specific person in their organization responsible for digital accessibility, 37% did not know where in the organization this responsibility lay, and 24% said there was little or no interest at the executive level.
- Observations on learning and development opportunities were also different. 40% of respondents agreed that "the organization helps individuals develop the skills needed to achieve its vision of digital accessibility," 33% disagreed, 20% declared neither "yes" nor "no," and 7% did not know).
- Regarding the process area, 38% of respondents agreed that "digital accessibility is built into the entire lifecycle of a product or service in my organization." However, a more significant percentage (43%) disagreed with this statement (of which ¼ strongly disagreed). 31% of respondents said their organizations inspected or evaluated websites, applications or other digital resources for customers using WCAG standards at least once a year, and another 6% said this occurs every few years. 14% said such a process takes place only when needed, and the same number said it was not regular. 10% did not know the regularity of the reviews, and 6% said they are not performed in their organizations.
- Purchasing products and services can support organizations to some extent in their digital accessibility strategies. 37% of respondents agreed that "the organization ensures that purchasing practices and decisions help us maintain or achieve our digital accessibility goals." A slightly higher percentage (39%) disagreed with this statement, with 22% strongly disagreeing. 39% of those in procurement roles knew guidelines to consider when evaluating whether third-party services will be accessible when integrated into their websites or applications. 51% felt that suppliers increasingly know the need to provide accessible products and services.

The research also provided several other interesting insights. Survey respondents reported (21%) that their organizations do not regularly use the option of testing websites, apps and other digital resources with users with disabilities, even though such tests are much better at identifying usability and accessibility issues than accessibility audits alone cannot detect.

In addition, they provide insight into how people with different disabilities and access needs use products and services. 25% of respondents said that their organizations did not conduct such tests.

The survey also addressed the impact of artificial intelligence on an organization's ability to create accessible solutions. 23% of respondents thought the impact would be positive, 5% thought it would be harmful, and 50% saw both positive and negative impacts. A large proportion (21%) could not assess the impact at this stage. Automation of testing and time savings were most often cited as benefits that AI can bring in improving accessibility.

In terms of spending on digital accessibility, respondents said their organizations may be planning to increase budgets in areas such as improving digital accessibility in current products and services (34% of indications), digital accessibility built into new products and services (30%), accessibility training and staff development (28%), developing strategies to improve digital accessibility across the organization (24%), and making recruitment processes accessible to all (22%).

Another document that provides the most comprehensive insight to date into the U.S. market's approach to digital accessibility is the fifth annual "State of Digital" report (Level Access, 2023), published in December 2023 by Level Access (<https://www.levelaccess.com/>) – a leading digital accessibility platform for businesses, in partnership with the Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies (G3ict, <http://www.g3ict.org/>) and the International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP), <https://www.accessibilityassociation.org/s/>).

1,033 U.S.-based business decision makers and technical/product specialists from organizations of all sizes, representing various industries, were surveyed. All of the professionals surveyed were involved in ensuring digital accessibility in their organizations. The survey indicates the high importance for organizations to make digital experiences accessible to people with disabilities while revealing the challenges companies face.

These mainly relate to internal discrepancies between executive management and practitioners and the need for clarity about compliance responsibilities. The report confirms that modern organizations understand that digital accessibility is not only a moral imperative and compliance requirement but also one of the best business practices.

While the majority of corporate organizations are implementing digital accessibility policies and noting the resulting business improvements, the data shows that there is a gap between the organization's intentions and effective implementation of the objectives.

The report's key findings reflect a trend toward rapid transformation toward accessibility, coupled with confusion about requirements and implementation:

- More than 70% of respondents' organizations have implemented a digital accessibility policy, identifying accessibility as key to improving user experience, customer satisfaction and brand reputation.
- 83% of respondents are confident in the accessibility of their organization's core digital solutions (such as the website). However, 40% say their organizations have been involved in legal proceedings related to lack of accessibility in the past 12 months. This indicates a gap between companies' perceptions of digital accessibility and the extent of compliance requirements under the law. The gap between leaders and practitioners is also apparent. Leaders are more confident and less aware of resource gaps. Nearly half (45%) of senior leaders believe their digital accessibility practices are "highly developed," with only 23% of practitioners agreeing.
- 75% of respondents say their organizations want to improve digital accessibility but have too many competing demands, and 69% say they lack sufficient time to address accessibility issues.
- Respondents cited taking accessibility into account at the design stage (56%), testing accessibility during product development (52%) and implementing digital accessibility training for employees (49%) as the most influential activities to improve digital accessibility.
- Respondents from organizations that have a person or department centrally responsible for accessibility are significantly more likely to rate their digital accessibility programs as "developed" or "highly developed" (78% versus 19% from organizations lacking such a department).

The report also provides data and analysis on trends in the use of digital accessibility across industries, the impact of digital accessibility on organizational priorities, and information on how organizations are managing digital accessibility, which activities are pushing programs forward, what barriers to progress exist, and what are the key determinants of successful digital accessibility programs (Level Access, 2023).

Also worth mentioning are insights from the Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology – PEAT. PEAT was founded in 2013 and has helped dozens of companies build accessibility awareness in their workplace.

The organization ensures that most of its member companies already have accessibility policies and programs in place. Increasingly, they are making digital accessibility necessary for their internal systems and the products and services they bring to market.

However, it turns out that the problem is finding job candidates with the right accessibility skills. In collaboration with Teach Access, PEAT produced a report on this topic in May 2018 (PEAT, 2018). It is based on information from members and partners about accessibility skills in their organizations.

Seventy respondents from various companies and public sector organizations were contacted. 3 out of 5 respondents confirmed that finding job candidates with digital accessibility skills is "difficult or very difficult" for their organizations; none of the companies surveyed rated the task as straightforward. 63% said that their current employees do not have the desired skills related to accessible technology to achieve their organizations' goals, and 38% said that, as a result, recruitment is ongoing and jobs remain unfilled.

The survey found (PEAT, 2018) that while respondents believe such an investment is worthwhile, the skills gap can lead to increased costs and reduced productivity. As a last resort, organizations pay for on-the-job training or supplement it with external training to help their employees develop accessibility skills. One respondent lamented that his organization employs very bright people but has to start from scratch regarding accessibility.

According to respondents, the demand for accessibility skills will continue to grow. Among IT respondents, 83% reported a moderate or significant increase in demand for accessibility skills over the past five years, and more than 93% of industry respondents expect demand to increase in the future. 93.5% of all respondents said it was essential for them to hire more people with accessibility skills.

In this context, the results of a study by Paula Conn et al. (2020) conducted among final-year computer science students at Rochester Institute of Technology in the US are relevant. They analyzed students' attitudes, understanding and motivations for considering accessibility in their future careers. The study found that the vast majority of students (more than 87%) did not consider accessibility when completing IT projects in their future work, nor were they motivated to improve their skills in this area.

Survey participants explained their attitude by the fact that neither in classes nor during internships were required to take accessibility into account, hence they do not see the ability to provide accessibility as important, let alone necessary in their profession.

The students also added that they mainly acquired knowledge independently, with professors only indicating what they were to learn and enforcing it. These requirements were generally unrelated to accessibility, so they overlooked these aspects. They also admitted that they had little knowledge of what people with disabilities need and how to communicate with them.

According to them, such information is relatively tricky to find in online resources, which, due to their self-study, are their primary source of knowledge.

Finally, it is worth quoting the experience of Polish entrepreneurs. They indicate (10 lat dostępności cyfrowej, 2022) that implementing digital accessibility in organizations is not easy and fast. This is because companies face many challenges and difficulties that they must overcome. These include:

- *Technological barriers*: because digital accessibility requires the use of appropriate technologies and tools, which for many companies can be complicated to understand and implement,
- *Organizational challenges*: digital accessibility requires the commitment of the entire organization, which can be difficult to achieve, especially in larger companies,
- *Still low awareness of the need for accessibility*: in the coming years, it will still be people, not technology, who will be vital to ensuring the accessibility of websites and mobile applications, so willingness, lack of mental barriers and understanding of the desirability of efforts in this direction are needed,
- *Lack of sufficient knowledge* in society about what problems people with disabilities face and how they can be solved,
- *Challenges related to the accessibility of non-textual content*: Accessibility is mainly based on text. Meanwhile, the Internet is moving decisively toward images and multimedia, making it more difficult and time-consuming to ensure the accessibility of such content. As a result, accessibility loses out to the need for ever-faster publication of information.

It is worth adding that for public institutions legally obliged to ensure digital accessibility, a challenge discussed at the conference mentioned above is the all-too-frequent invocation of the high costs of these measures and the abuse of accessibility regulations' flexibility. Indeed, this flexibility is intended to create an opportunity for various institutions to achieve full accessibility in a planned and responsible manner. It should not be an excuse for not taking specific actions or unreasonably delaying them.

4. The Business Value of Digital Accessibility in an Organization

There are still organizations on the market whose managers believe that providing digital accessibility is a complex and unprofitable job, which is not worth undertaking due to costs and the need for other tasks. However, as the research cited above indicates, more and more companies are paying attention to aspects of digital accessibility, as numerous studies confirm the positive results of implementing

accessibility and point to the benefits that accrue to a company that cares about the digital accessibility of its websites/applications. Taking the business case developed by PEAT (PEAT, 2023) as a basis, the following benefits of promoting and implementing accessibility in an organization can be mentioned:

- **Improved and expanded recruitment.** Technology tools often help recruit talent, so providing access to such tools is essential. First and foremost, an accessible website and online job application system ensures - and communicates - that this company is interested in all qualified individuals, including those with disabilities. This is an obvious way to expand the applicant pool.
- **Increased opportunity for talent retention.** Accessible technology is a bright corporate continuity strategy. Employees who become ill or injured or develop age-related functional limitations may need available technology to do their jobs. Their experience and knowledge should be retained whenever possible, as deploying new employees is much more expensive than retaining existing ones. Eliminating the cost of training a new employee is one of the main benefits of providing current employees with disabilities with the tools they need to continue working.
- **Employee success.** All employees need technology tools to do their jobs, from computers to online forms to cell phones. The flexibility offered by accessibility features (such as volume control, easy-to-read screens, video captions and plain language) often helps people without disabilities. Providing all employees with what they need to succeed makes good business sense. This principle is an argument for caring about accessible technology in companies.
- **Cost-effectiveness compared to assistive technology (AT).** While AT devices may be necessary for some employees with disabilities, popular technologies suitable for everyone without additional AT tend to be less expensive and easier to manage. This is because they help optimize the productivity of many employees, not just those with specific needs.
- **Improving usability and SEO.** Websites and mobile apps that are digitally accessible tend to be more convenient and easier to navigate for all users. Additionally, digital accessibility can improve search engine positioning, which increases a site's visibility.
- **Diversity.** Experienced companies know that a diverse team leads to more innovative solutions. People with disabilities add an essential dimension to this diversity, and accessible technology can ensure their representation among employees at all levels (Page, 2007).

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- **Company image.** Accessible technology highlights and communicates your commitment to workforce diversity and equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Prioritizing accessibility is a sign of an organization's social responsibility, which attracts customers, investors, and employees who identify with such values. Lack of accessibility can damage a company's reputation and make it less attractive to customers and employees.
 - **Expanding the target market.** Customers with various limitations can reach and learn about the company's offerings. Wider reach opens up new business opportunities for the organization. If a website, app or other digital tools are not accessible to people with various disabilities, the organization loses potential customers and potential revenue. At the same time, it is essential to remember that people with disabilities represent a significant and growing market segment. According to Casey (2020), globally, people with disabilities command an income of more than \$8 trillion. This is a significant enough purchasing power that organizations should not ignore it.
 - **Increasing competitiveness.** Organizations that invest in digital accessibility can gain a competitive advantage. Many companies and institutions still do not meet all accessibility requirements, so being a leader in this area can attract new customers and business partners.
 - **Easier collaboration.** When features and services are available to all users, collaborating with partners, suppliers, and other business counterparties becomes more convenient and efficient.
 - **Efficiency, productivity, and increased user engagement.** Digital accessibility makes it easier to use tools and services. Employees are more productive, as positive experiences lead them to be more engaged. Satisfied customers are more loyal and inclined to return and use the organization's services again.
 - **Regulatory compliance.** Regulations on digital accessibility are present in many countries. Organizations that take care to comply with these requirements do not run the risk of financial penalties.

The above list indicates that implementing and ensuring digital accessibility has benefits both within the organization and in dealing with customers, the market and the environment. The consequences of not investing in accessibility can, therefore, be severe.

Organizations that do not offer accessible work environments may lose valuable employees. Reducing diversity and inclusivity in the workplace negatively impacts

productivity and innovation (Gala, 2024a). Lack of accessibility excludes a significant portion of the population, depriving companies of potential customers.

The company's reach and brand relevance are diminished. By failing to meet the needs of people with disabilities, companies can lose access to a significant and growing market. By failing to invest in accessibility, they risk falling behind competitors for whom it is one of their priorities. Also, a company's reputation could be damaged if it is deemed insensitive to the needs of people with disabilities.

This, in turn, will lead to a loss of customer confidence and, over time, a decrease in loyalty to the company. Accessibility can help build a solid and inclusive image. In countries where digital accessibility is regulated by law, non-compliance can result in fines and other legal sanctions. Financial penalties affect a company's profits and cause image damage.

According to forecasts (Statista Report, 2024), e-commerce's share of global retail sales will continue to grow, reaching nearly a quarter of total retail sales by 2027. With online stores' growing presence and influence in everyday life, it is essential, especially for companies in this sector, to be aware of the need to guarantee digital accessibility, enabling autonomy for as many consumers as possible. This could determine their competitiveness and their survival in the market in general.

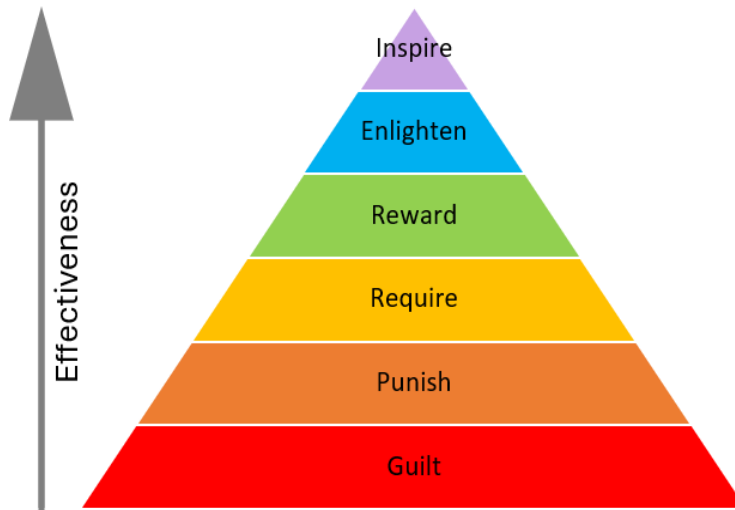
According to Nucleus Research (2019), blind people, on average, abandon two-thirds of their online transactions due to lack of accessibility. However, they do not abandon purchases but make them elsewhere, on accessible websites. 50% of those surveyed also encountered web accessibility regression, i.e., a website originally designed to be accessible became inaccessible due to changes and updates.

Companies that do not invest in accessibility cite financial costs as the most common reason, explaining their belief that providing accessibility is expensive. Measuring the return on investment in accessibility initiatives is indeed tricky.

It can be a significant problem for companies, especially since the significant economic and social benefits of accessibility must be considered alongside the financial issues. Quite a few companies also find that providing and maintaining accessible websites is difficult and takes time that is better spent on other tasks. However, many guides offer simple tips on how to lead the process (Handtalk, 2024).

The following presents a hierarchy of ways to motivate accessibility implementation and their popularity and effectiveness. The pyramid was developed by Smith of WebAIM more than ten years ago (Smith, 2013), and business practice confirms that it is still valid (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hierarchy of motivations for implementing accessibility.



Source: Smith 2013.

Despite not being necessary or even beneficial for compelling motivation, the bottom elements of this hierarchy are usually used most often. Guilt induced by comments like "if you as an organization cared about people with disabilities, you would certainly do..." is the worst yet most accessible form of motivation to use.

The threat of punishment, such as "if your site is not fully accessible, we will boycott it" or "ensure accessibility, or you will be sued," is another popular method used to achieve accessibility. Both of these forms of motivation are very dangerous, as they can easily make people with disabilities be seen as enemies and antagonists rather than beneficiaries of accessibility and potential collaborators.

Demanding technical requirements or compliance with guidelines can improve accessibility, but they are usually only a necessary basis for more effective motivations because they are overwhelmingly insufficient on their own. Such requirements often overlook the human element of accessibility, i.e., something may be *technically* accessible but *functionally* impenetrable.

Motivation toward providing accessibility can also come from gamification, awards, and certifications. However, in these cases, it is usually about personal reward and recognition rather than the resulting benefit to end users. The best situation is when the reward that satisfies the company is simply knowing it is expanding its market to a broader population.

It is worth enlightening so that members of the organization personally see accessibility as the right and smart thing to do and see the huge benefits that

accessibility provides to end users. This will motivate them to do more in this direction because, in their minds, doing things differently will not make sense.

At the top of the pyramid is inspiration – the most effective form of motivation. It is the state when employees see and experience the precise impact of their own organization's accessible product on the life of a person with a disability. Understanding that *our* accessible product is making a difference in someone's life makes accessibility important.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Digital accessibility issues are critical with the increasing development of IT and the growing IT support for various areas of life. Digital accessibility allows people with various disabilities, such as visual, hearing, motor or intellectual problems, to use websites and mobile applications. Attention to these aspects is a measure of society's inclusiveness.

Laws in many countries require public entities to meet specific accessibility requirements. In contrast, companies and other commercial organizations are voluntarily beginning to move in this direction, recognizing various economic, social and financial benefits.

The research findings presented in the article from business practice on how companies ensure digital accessibility demonstrate the need to further raise awareness and develop guidance, materials and guidelines to help companies ease their transition through the process. They also prompt recommendations in the following areas:

1. **Promoting accessibility awareness.** Organizations should promote awareness of digital accessibility both internally and externally. Education and outreach campaigns can help increase understanding and support for accessibility initiatives.
2. **Collecting feedback from users.** Regularly collecting feedback from users of websites and applications, including people with disabilities, can provide valuable information on real-world issues and needs. This feedback can be used to improve digital accessibility continuously.
3. **Include accessibility in the design process.** Digital accessibility should be considered at every stage of the design and development process. Incorporating accessibility experts into design teams can help create more accessible products and services from the beginning of their development, thereby reducing the costs associated with later potential revisions and adjustments.
4. **Using automatic testing tools.** Several automatic accessibility testing tools can help you detect problems quickly. These tools can be used

regularly to ensure that a website or mobile app complies with accessibility guidelines.

5. **Implementing WCAG standards.** Organizations should strive to meet WCAG's AA-level guidelines, considered the standard for digital accessibility.
6. **Constant monitoring and updating.** Digital accessibility is an ongoing process that requires regular monitoring and updating. This is because, as practice indicates, many users experience accessibility regression due to site changes and their lack of accessibility monitoring.
7. **Training for employees.** Digital accessibility training for employees is crucial to ensure that everyone in the organization understands the importance of accessibility and can implement appropriate solutions.
8. **Conduct an accessibility audit.** Regular accessibility audits allow to identify and fix digital accessibility issues. You can outsource such audits to third-party specialists to increase the chances that your website or mobile app meets all its intended requirements.
9. **Creating accessibility declarations.** Every website and mobile application should have an accessibility declaration that informs users about the state of accessibility, any problems, and how to solve them.
10. **Cooperation with NGOs.** Working with NGOs specialising in digital accessibility can provide valuable information and support. Such organizations can help test and evaluate accessibility and train staff.
11. **Education and inclusion of accessibility in curricula.** It should not be forgotten that for a company's digital services and products to be inclusive, its designers, developers, and content writers must have the proper knowledge and skills, making it slow for them to fulfil their accessibility roles successfully. This, in turn, requires changes in the education system since, as numerous studies (Lewthwaite et al., 2023) indicate, accessibility is currently not widely included in academic curricula, and most university graduates enter the job market without awareness and understanding of accessibility.
12. **Consider accessibility expertise when recruiting and staffing.** Professionals designing and building the digital landscape are unprepared to meet accessibility needs. Many do not view accessibility as a core competency. They are not adequately familiar with accessibility guidelines and regulations and how to apply them (Patel et al., 2020). The results of a survey of software industry job ads posted on LinkedIn showed that accessibility skills were not required for any of the general software engineering positions and were also not included in most job ads for designer, developer and software tester positions (Martin et al., 2022).

In summary, modern companies are those for whom the terms **universal design, user interface, user experience, and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines** have become commonplace when designing and creating products, especially digital

products. As societies, we are slowly reaching a stage where not only governments and public institutions but also companies and commercial organizations are beginning to recognize the importance of digital accessibility. In addition to empathy, it is essential to take a professional approach and treat digital equality in terms of key business objectives. Creating positive digital experiences for all users can be critical to an organization's success.

Investing in accessibility is one characteristic of companies of the future that understand their space in society and realize the need to adapt to become increasingly inclusive. This applies to both employee and customer approaches.

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