

Empowering people

Helping to make the web
accessible to all...

The launch of the World Wide Web 15 years ago has transformed our lives and has had a huge impact on communication, entertainment and access to information. The versatility and ease of access that the web provides has also had a democratising affect on society with an increasing number of people launching online businesses, blogging, podcasting and getting involved in social networking online; this is a reflection of the internet's ability to provide a platform for engagement and influence. Everyone can benefit from the internet and anyone can make a contribution, but only if it is universally accessible.

Legislation and the current state of accessibility

In 1999, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) launched an initiative to make the web more accessible for the disabled, resulting in the publication of a set of guidelines that websites should conform to. On the 6th December 2006, the Disability Equality Duty, part of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) will come into effect and require all public sector websites to comply with the basic standards for accessibility.

In 2002, a report by the Interactive Bureau on 20 key 'flagship' government websites found that 75% were 'in need of immediate attention in one area or another' and were not compliant with part 3 of the DDA. A separate study by the Disability Rights Commission published in 2004 found that 81% of 1,000 representative websites used by the public were not compliant with basic W3C accessibility guidelines. More recently, a 2006 survey of the UK's 30 most important retail websites by Nomensa found that none of them met minimum accessibility standards for disabled shoppers. Specifically, 29 had text that was difficult to read for

people wearing glasses; 28 were not fully compatible with screen reader software used by the visually impaired; 23 of the websites used features that would only work with Javascript, a feature often disabled by photosensitive epileptics as it can trigger seizures; and 29 websites did not use shortcut links to enable people to navigate without using a mouse (important for those lacking manual dexterity).

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Threats and opportunities

The Royal National Institute of the Blind has recently threatened to start prosecuting anyone running a website that falls short of accessibility standards. However, cases of successful prosecution on the grounds of poor accessibility are best exemplified abroad. The Australian case in 2000 of Maguire vs. the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games found that the Committee had been in breach of the Australian Disability Discrimination Act 1992 by failing to provide a website that Maguire could access and use; this cost them A\$20,000. In 2004, US travel sites Ramada.com and Priceline.com were successfully sued for US\$40,000 and US\$37,500 respectively, both for having websites judged to discriminate against the visually impaired.

With 10 million disabled people in the UK (one in six), the threat of legal

action via the DDA and human rights complaints against public and private organisations is real. However, there is also a strong economic argument to promote accessibility, with disabled people potentially being able to spend £376m online if allowed to do so. As an inclusive society aiming to make best use of the talents of all its people, web accessibility must be a priority for the UK's internet strategy, especially if we are to realise the potential of the internet as a force for development and social change.

About Falcon Websites

Our experience in the field of web accessibility and general website development has enabled us to provide public and private sector organisations with the opportunity to reform their websites and engage a wider section of the online community. Our dedicated web development teams contain a mix of designers and programmers with a diverse range of technical capabilities and experience in creating accessible websites or redesigning non-compliant ones. We passionately believe in the ability of the internet to empower people and we are proud of our work to help make the web more user-friendly and accessible for all.



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