

The Importance of Digital Accessibility Policies in Promoting Inclusivity and Diversity

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Abstract- In today's world, with technological advancement, it is important to have policies that can guide and provide a clear roadmap for everyone to follow, especially in the field of digital accessibility. This is due to the significance of digital accessibility in terms of inclusiveness and diversity, as well as the major benefits it provides to all communities. The importance and benefits include but are not limited to meeting legal obligations and reaching a larger audience. This article demonstrates the importance of having digital accessibility policies and how implementing these policies benefits everyone, including people with disabilities.

Keywords- Digital Accessibility; Policy; Disabilities.

1. Introduction

What do you do when the technology that is meant to make your life easier makes it harder instead? Do you feel that it is fair that People with Disabilities (PWD) continue to face difficulties, obtaining basic products and services in this era of digitization? Over the past few years, there has been an increasing demand for people to access and utilize digital information and services. This shift is largely since digital systems and services have transformed the way we live, work, and communicate, becoming an integral part of our daily lives. Unfortunately, people with disabilities continue to face difficulties in using and benefiting from services in many countries because many of these services and products are not designed with accessibility in mind. For example, poor color contrast and missing alternative text can make a website difficult to access for visually impaired. A video without captions, for example, may be inaccessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. People with cognitive impairments might have difficulties comprehending complex information or navigating complex interfaces, thus, a person suffering from a learning disability may have difficulty understanding instructions on a website or completing forms. It is worth noting that these are just a few examples of the difficulties that people with disabilities might face when they try to use digital products or services.

Today, an estimated 1.3 billion people, or 16% of the global population, have a significant disability (World Health Organization, 2023). Given the large number of people with disabilities, there is a need for establishing policies that would support them and ensure that their rights are being protected. The concept of accessibility is a term that refers to the extent to which a product, device, service, and environment are accessible and navigable for those with disabilities as well as for those with other special needs or functional limitations. (Mada Accessibility and AT Glossary). Digital accessibility focuses on access to technology products, resources and services that span

hardware and software. The primary aim of digital accessibility is to enable equitable access to diverse kinds of digital resources to the widest range of individuals, including those with disabilities (Sharma et al., 2019). These digital resources encompass a broad range of systems and services, such as websites, software, mobile applications, electronic platforms, programs, and e-documents. It is important to recognize that digital accessibility pertains to a variety of disabilities, including but not limited to auditory, cognitive, physical, speech, and visual impairments, as well as age-related limitations that may hinder or diminish one's capacity to effectively utilize digital systems and services (Web Accessibility Initiative, 2022).

The establishment of policies in general will ensure consistency and fairness, along with compliance with relevant regulations and best practices, whereas accessibility policies, in particular, ensure that digital content, services, and technologies are available to all people, including those with disabilities. These policies are especially important in this era, when so many products and services are being delivered via digital channels such as mobile apps or websites. With the difficulties that many people with disabilities face in accessing digital content, leading to feelings of exclusion and frustration, digital accessibility policies come in to guarantee that everyone, regardless of ability, has equal access to digital contents and services.

In the first part of this essay, we will provide an overview of the importance of digital accessibility policies and their significance in terms of inclusion and diversity, and finally, possible future directions.

2. The Importance of Digital Accessibility

2.1. Access For Everyone

In today's world, where digital technology is ubiquitous, digital accessibility policies are critical for promoting inclusivity and diversity. These policies ensure that digital resources, such as websites, mobile applications, and other digital tools, are accessible to everyone, regardless of their abilities or conditions. One of the benefits of implementing these policies is that it guarantees equal access to digital resources for all individuals.

The United Nations (n.d.) defines access for all as the importance of ensuring that digital communication and services are available to everyone, regardless of their age, gender, ability, or location. Thus, to create a digital world that is inclusive and diverse, it is crucial for legislators, policymakers, ICT providers, and other stakeholders implement accessibility measures in all countries. By doing so, we can ensure that everyone has equal access to digital resources and opportunities, promoting digital accessibility for all.

2.2. Meeting Legal Obligations

Digital accessibility policies are highly significant because they ensure adherence to legal requirements. Several countries have enacted legislation to guarantee digital accessibility for people with disabilities, including the United States, Canada, and member states of the European Union. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), for example, requires both public and private entities in the United States to provide equal access to goods, services, and information, including digital content (Americans with Disabilities Act, 2023). Non-compliance with the ADA can lead to legal penalties and reputational damage.

Similar to this, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible and usable by individuals with disabilities (Section 508, 2022). Likewise, Qatar has policy that ensures and guarantees equitable access to technologies for people with disabilities in the country (Ministry of Transport and Communications, 2011). This policy is referred as Qatar's e-Accessibility policy, and it was updated in 2023. It focuses on a wide range of e-Accessibility issues, including those related to websites, telecommunications services, handsets, ATMs, government services, access to assistive technologies and digital content. Making digital content accessible to people with disabilities not only avoids legal ramifications like lawsuits and fines, but it also promotes a culture of diversity and inclusivity. Therefore, policymakers and decision-makers can turn to the Mada Policy portal (Mada ICT Accessibility Policy portal), which provides information on laws and regulations from local, regional, and global sources, to ensure compliance with legal obligations.

2.3. Reaching Wider Audience

Knowing that a large percentage of the global population has some form of disability, it only makes sense from a marketing perspective to adopt digital policies that enable people with disabilities to use and benefit from their respective products and services. This will indeed make the marketing teams truly effective with their campaigns, because they will reach all their targeted audience. Doing so results in increased sales and revenues given that such action will include a large group of our communities. Not only that, but when business owners, organizations, and others prioritize inclusivity and diversity, they can improve their products and services to better meet a diverse audience, which ultimately increases engagement and loyalty from these audiences, resulting in increased expansion and success.

2.4. Better User Experience

The concept of experience extends beyond simply owning a device, website, or app. It includes all aspects of how you perceive the world, interact with others, and interact with services or technological systems. In essence, experience is a comprehensive system. The term "user experience," or "UX," refers to a person's perceptions and reactions as a result of using or anticipating using a product, system, or service (International Organization for Standardization, 2010). As a matter of fact, user experience and accessibility are connected in some way. Accessibility features can greatly enhance the usability and satisfaction of a product or service for a wide range of people. That is, designing a system or a product with accessibility in mind can significantly improve the overall user experience. This brings us to the concept of accessible universal design. Accessible universal design refers to the design of products and environments to be accessible to the greatest number of people without requiring adaptation or specialized design. (Persson et al., 2014). The following seven principles can be used to elaborate on this concept:

- **Equitable Use:** The design is useful and marketable to a variety of individuals with varying abilities.
- **Flexibility in Use:** This design is capable of accommodating a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
- **Simple and Intuitive use:** It is easy for the user to understand how to use the design regardless of their prior experience, knowledge, or skill level

- **Perceptible Information:** The design communicates necessary information to the user effectively, regardless of ambient conditions or the level of sensory ability of the user.
- **Tolerance for Error:** The design minimizes the possibility of accidents and unintended actions.
- **Low Physical Effort:** This design is created to be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum amount of fatigue.
- **Size and Space or Approach and Use:** This design ensures regardless of a user's body size, posture, or mobility things are designed to fit them properly.

Accessible, usable, and universal design are critical components in creating an inclusive society. Policies help make this possible by promoting and enforcing these design principles. That said, UX designers should imbed accessibility within the day-to-day creations to show the least amount of empathy for disabled users. This requires acknowledging that not everyone uses services or products the same way.

To gain access to the service, some people may need to use assistive technologies (AT). Any item or software program that assists people with disabilities in increasing, maintaining, or improving their functional abilities is referred to as assistive technology (AT). Assistive technologies include screen readers and screen magnifiers (Okonji & Ogwezzy, 2018). Let's consider now an example of how improving accessibility can enhance the user experience, including captions and transcripts to a video will not only benefit people who are deaf or have hearing impairments, but it will also enhance the overall user experience. This is evident when looking at how people act when they watch a video in either a quiet or a noisy environment. Specifically, when people watch videos in a quiet environment, such as libraries, they will not be allowed to watch the video in its normal volume. Instead, they will have to decrease the volume and rely heavily on the captions. Similarly, people who watch videos in a noisy setting, such as shopping malls, no matter how increased the volume is, they will not be able to hear and will have to thus rely heavily on the captions. Therefore, accessible design will not only improve the overall usability but will also aid in reaching a larger audience, as services coded to accessibility standards have higher prominence on search engines, making the product easier to find.

3. Conclusion and Future Directions

Given the large number of people with disabilities worldwide, as well as the importance of technology in the present era, having digital policies in place to ensure compliance is essential. Digital accessibility policies play an important role in ensuring equal access for all individuals, as well as ensuring adherence to legal requirements. By implementing these policies, organizations and business owners can benefit by reaching a larger audience, which increases their expansion and success. Not only that, but ensuring digital policies can improve the overall user experience. Thus, given the importance of these policies, it is critical for all countries to have policies in this field, or at the very least to follow the ones that exist.

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