

The internet is a medium that should be open to everyone. However, perception often differs from reality and as such surfing the web can sometimes be a rather exclusive, rather than inclusive experience.

Poor accessibility means that everyday activities carried out online - checking email, reading a news story, buying flight tickets or balancing bank accounts - become a nightmare for many disabled surfers.

The good news, however, is the net is getting easier to use and there are many commendable efforts made by organisations to improve accessibility for the over half-a-billion people in the world who are disabled in one way or another.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act, companies such as ourselves must ensure that content is accessible to all users.

Accessibility for everyone is very important to us. We regard it as another challenge for creativity and innovation and not as a barrier. We strive to create a professional and accessible site that can be enjoyed by everyone.

What is accessibility? Accessibility basically entails providing flexibility to accommodate each user's needs and preferences. In an internet context, accessibility means making computer technology such as web pages and applications/software more useful and flexible to an individual needs.

What are the main issues? Sadly, the internet isn't always accessible to everyone. The main issues which can cause problems include:

- Complex and convoluted navigational menus that are a nightmare to follow
- Overly designed websites that use fancy graphics and flashing images
- The use of small fonts which cannot be re-sized by the user - making it difficult to read even my people with minor vision problems The lack of use of Alt tags to accompany images

The solutions There are several ways in which websites can make themselves more accessible to all audiences. Above all, websites need to adopt certain accessibility standards.

Accessibility standards The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has established a set of guidelines so that organisations can design websites that can be used by people with disabilities. The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), part of the W3C, in co-ordination with organisations around the world, is pursuing web accessibility through primary areas of work.

The current version of the WAI Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) (see Note 1 below) can be found at w3c.org.

Accessibility software There is a number of software products available that can aid disabled users when surfing the net or with reading documents and attachments. Useful software:

- [Screenreader](#) A blind or visually impaired person can use a screen reader - basically a piece of software that reads out the content on a webpage.
- [Connect Outloud](#) Connect Outloud is designed for the novice to experienced blind or low vision computer user to access the Internet through speech and Braille output.
- [MAGic](#) Screen magnification software.
- [Microsoft Word Viewer](#) Microsoft Word Viewer 97-2000 is a download that lets users who do not own Microsoft Word view and print documents that were created in Word.
- [Microsoft Excel Viewer](#) With Excel Viewer 2003, you can open, view, and print Excel workbooks, even if you don't have Excel installed.

- [Adobe Acrobat](#) If you need help with accessing or creating a document with accessibility in mind, Adobe has a range of free software that can help you create, manage, and deliver accessible, visually rich content that can be accessed virtually anywhere, anytime, and by anyone.
- [Media players](#) Just as a web page can be made accessible to a disabled person, so too can rich media content such as audio and video. The three major media players (Windows Media Player, Quicktime and RealMedia Player) all claim to be accessibility friendly. The standalone versions of the three media players are far more accessible than the embedded (built into a web page) versions. Of the three standalone players, Windows Media Player and RealOne Player tend to present a high level of accessibility when using screen readers, for example.

Browsers Internet browsers can also have an impact on accessibility online.

Did you know that you can change things like foreground and background colours, font size and the range of colours provided within a webpage?

If you're an Internet explorer user, you can easily change the accessibility option in your browser (see link to instructions below). People with disabilities such as hearing, visual, physical or cognitive impairment can use a wide range of alternative approaches to browsing online.

These browsers are designed specifically for people with disabilities:

- [Emacspeak](#) Emacspeak is a speech interface that allows visually impaired users to interact independently and efficiently with the computer.
- [Sensus](#) Internet Browser A low-vision internet browser from Sensus in Denmark. Speech output, Braille support, special screen fonts.
- [Simply Web 2000](#) Simply Web 2000 is a speech friendly, speech enabled accessible web browser with advance features that allow easy navigation of complex pages by blind or visually impaired users.

These browsers also have some accessibility options:

- [Internet Explorer](#) Internet Explorer includes numerous options to make things easier to see on the computer screen, or to adjust to your visual preferences.
- [Firefox](#) A very user friendly, uncluttered and flexible browser that is a real alternative to Internet Explorer.
- [Opera](#) Claims to be the fastest and most efficient web browser going.

Useful links:

- [RNIB](#) RNIB is the largest charity representing the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK.
- [Disability](#) disability.gov.uk is the website of the UK Government's Disability Policy Division, a part of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
- [Disability Discrimination Act](#) Full text of this act of parliament
- [Disability Rights Commission Report](#) Report from the DRC's formal investigation into access and inclusion for disabled people to the web, April 2004.
- [Webxacts](#) WebXACT is a free online service that lets you test single pages of web content for quality, accessibility, and privacy issues.
- [Ability.net](#) AbilityNet is a UK based charity who work with people with disabilities to help them get full use of information technology.