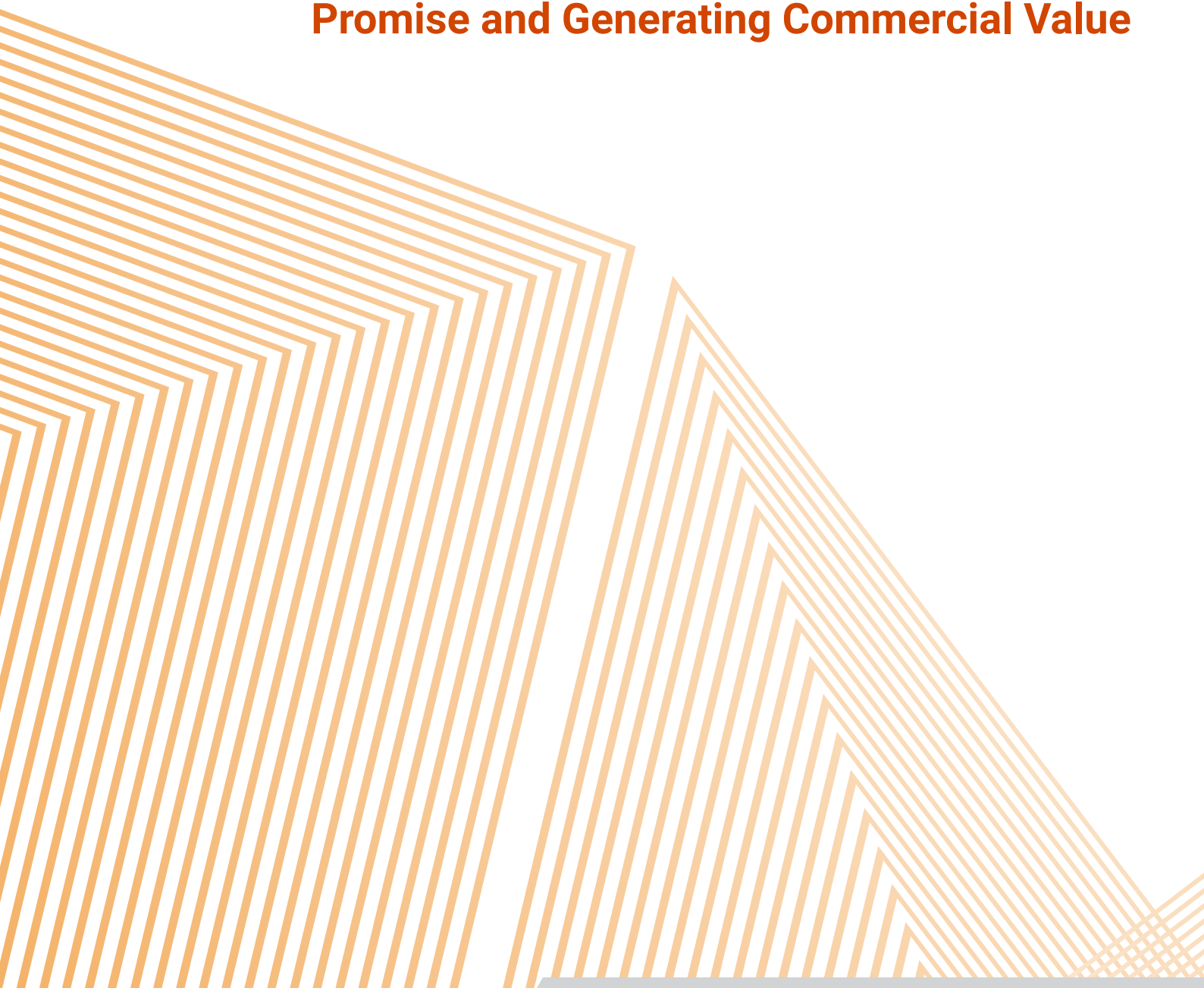


# Digital Accessibility

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**A Business Case for Building an Inclusive Brand  
Promise and Generating Commercial Value**



## Executive Summary

Even though digital accessibility has picked up steam, accessible design is still not a priority for most businesses and remains an afterthought that is required to meet legal obligations. What they are not aware of is the immense business value that accessible design promises to deliver when integrated with overall digital strategy. That is because businesses often believe that accessibility is aimed at making content and information accessible for disabled people—which of course is the core objective; however, designing products and services with accessibility features often results in hybrid experiences for every user.

Keeping accessibility and inclusion in mind guarantees improved usability, which goes way beyond the target audience and simplifies the interaction for everyone regardless of their situation or inherent capabilities. For instance, SMS texting was originally invented for people with hearing disabilities people so that they could communicate using mobile phones.<sup>1</sup> But it revolutionized mobile communication because of its simplicity and universal appeal. Today, over 23 billion SMS messages are exchanged globally every day.<sup>2</sup> In essence, accessible digital assets benefit everyone and simplify the interaction with information and technology, thus delivering an outstanding user experience. Companies of all stripes can derive incredible business value if they truly embrace digital accessibility. It ensures inclusivity, reduces risk of noncompliance and litigation cost, strengthens brand value and loyalty, extends market reach, and above all, drives deeper engagement. This paper discusses why companies need to rethink their approach to accessibility and how it presents a strong business value proposition that should not be ignored.



“Deafness Led to the Phone, Internet & SMS Texts,” Sound Advice,

<https://sound-advice.ie/deaf-phone-internet-sms-text/#:~:text=The%20idea%20of%20SMS%20was,world%20of%20cellular%20telecommunications%20changed.>

<sup>2</sup> “Daily SMS Mobile Usage Statistics” SMSEagle,

<https://www.smseagle.eu/2017/03/06/daily-sms-mobile-statistics/>

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## Embracing Digital Accessibility Is a Key Business Imperative

In recent years digital accessibility has grown in popularity with businesses striving to make their digital content accessible to a large extent. Despite this growing trend, the general attitude toward web accessibility remains unchanged. It is still largely considered an essential step to mitigate any legal risks. However, this is a misconception. Globally, the annual disposable income of disabled people is reported to be a staggering \$13 trillion.<sup>3</sup> These statistics only account for people living with permanent disability, not the aging population or people suffering from temporary or situational disability. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), upward of 2 billion people would need assistive technology by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

Considering the size of this market segment in its entirety, focusing on web accessibility only for compliance or ignoring it is extremely short sighted and bad business. Investing in digital accessibility is the right thing to do, not only because it is ethical but also because it offers incredible business opportunity that goes beyond providing equal access to every user. By integrating it at the core of products and services, the design can dramatically improve overall user experience. From social responsibility and better user experience to improved branding and competitive differentiation, web accessibility has a compounding business impact that promises unparalleled business value.

## Understanding Key Factors Influencing Accessibility Trends

There is no contest that web accessibility is one of the most critical technology trends that has been in focus for the last couple of years. Leaders in every sector as well as smart organizations are already working toward making their digital experience equitable. Through right investments in accessibility, organizations are aiming to elevate overall customer experience and also build a sustainable advantage in serving, acquiring, and retaining customers. While 2019 witnessed web accessibility going mainstream, it kicked into high gear last year, and the trend continues to gain momentum. As the spotlight on inclusivity grows, let's take a look at the key factors that are driving this change.

### The growing legal scrutiny

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) developed by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) group of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) published WCAG 2.0 in 2008. While this version continues to be the gold standard, in 2018, WCAG 2.1 was published, which is an extension aimed at achieving greater digital accessibility.



<sup>3</sup> "The Global Economics of Disability 2020," World Federation of Advertisers,

<https://wfanet.org/page/1210/2020/09/01/The-Global-Economics-of-Disability-2020#:~:text=A%20market%20bigger%20than%20China,and%20attracting%20the%20best%20talent.>

<sup>4</sup> "Assistive technology," World Health Organization,

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/assistive-technology#:~:text=With%20an%20ageing%20global%20population,have%20access%20to%20assistive%20products.>

digital accessibility. To know more about WCAG guidelines, their timelines, and how to conform to these standards, read our white paper on this topic.

The relentless focus of WCAG on digital accessibility is a testament to its growing criticality. While these guidelines are not legally enforceable, every major accessibility law across Europe, the UK, and the United States is based on these guidelines and encourages businesses to conform to these standards. The United States has the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), published by the Department of Justice (DOJ), and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. The European Union follows the EU Web Accessibility Directive; Canada follows the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

The general and legal perception around web accessibility is continually evolving, compelling the trends in accessible design and development to evolve as well. While these laws are still limited in their scope, there has been a steady rise in the number of web accessibility lawsuits in the United States. Twenty percent of digital ADA cases are related to mobile apps being inaccessible,<sup>5</sup> while November 2020 saw over 51 ADA lawsuits filed in a single month.<sup>6</sup> This trend reflects that accessibility is increasingly being regulated, and nonconformance with accessibility standards can damage a company's reputation as well as result in needless financial risk.

### The demand for digital democracy

The concept of “physical infrastructure accessibility” has been in place for years, resulting in accessible public infrastructure, making it easier for differently abled people to live a more independent life. Now in the age of rapid digitization, accessibility has gone beyond access to physical infrastructure.

From social interactions, education, and banking to business transactions, every aspect of our lives is now being carried out on the web. It therefore comes as little surprise that there is a huge demand for making the web accessible to all. Rich and intuitive accessible designs hold the key to providing equal opportunities to the digitally disenfranchised and enabling them to fully participate, interact, and transact on the web.

The digitally disenfranchised are increasingly demanding for an equitable digital world. These include:

- People with reading, learning, or cognitive disabilities
- Aging population
- Nonnative speakers
- People with physical disabilities
- People with mobility impairments
- People with temporary or situational disabilities

### Inclusive design is going mainstream

Seeing that web accessibility is going mainstream, industry leaders and pioneers are focusing on integrating an inclusive design early on in the product/service development stage. They are increasingly prioritizing accessible design integration to cater to the unique needs of every user and deliver a great user experience to one and all.

<sup>5</sup>“App and Web Accessibility Lawsuits—What’s New in 2020,” UsableNet, <https://blog.usablenet.com/web-accessibility-lawsuits-whats-new-in-2020#:~:text=State%2Dfiled%20lawsuits%20and%20demand,2020%20than%20in%20years%20past>.

<sup>6</sup>“November 2020 ADA Website Lawsuit Data and Trends,” eSSENTIAL Accessibility, <https://www.essentialaccessibility.com/blog/november-2020-ada-website-lawsuit-data-and-trends>

Ideally, every organization should by now be following this process; however, it is yet to be embraced fully. That said, technology pioneers, like Apple and Microsoft, are leading the way in implementing inclusive design in their products. Apple’s investment in digital accessibility is exemplary. Their vision is to create an inclusive world, and building accessibility into the product core helps remove any barrier to information and supports that goal.<sup>7</sup>

Inclusive design not only helps incorporate accessibility into a product/service right from the start but also eliminates the trouble of integrating accessibility features on a piecemeal basis, which is far more tedious, complex, and expensive. This trend is likely to grow in popularity as businesses realize the benefits of born-accessible assets, in terms of cost optimization and market reach.

## Overlapping needs of the growing aging population

The percentage of the world’s aging population (60+ years) will nearly double from 12 to 22 percent between 2015 and 2050.<sup>8</sup> Maintaining a standard quality of life for the aging population is increasingly becoming a critical issue across the world. Digitization, of course, has had a major impact on the lives of these older adults; the web has enabled them to maintain social connections and also live an independent life.

However, as these adults continue to age, they face several functional, physical, and cognitive impairments that make them hesitant to use the web. These conditions overlap with people with disabilities, so making the web accessible is an increasingly important social factor as well. Easy access to information would empower the aging population to live independently and maintain a desirable quality of life.

The percentage of the world’s aging population (60+ years) will nearly double from 12 to 22 percent between 2015 and 2050. Digital accessibility will play a key role in ensuring this demographic has the ability to live independently and maintain a desirable quality of life.

## Looking Beyond Legal Compliance and Focusing on Business Opportunity

Legal liability is probably the topmost reason why organizations work to make their websites accessible. However, looking at accessibility only from a compliance perspective is rather myopic, which also means sidestepping a \$13 trillion<sup>9</sup> market—not a prudent business strategy. In fact, considering the statistics—the percentage of the global population living with disability, the growing aging demographic, and their disposable income—there is a compelling business case to be made for accessibility. From legal protection, brand recognition, and extended market reach to deeper customer engagement, making a strategic investment in accessibility is a smart business move that promises consistent rewards for any organization.

<sup>7</sup> “When It Comes to Accessibility, Apple Continues to Lead in Awareness and Innovation,” TechCrunch,

<https://techcrunch.com/2016/05/19/when-it-comes-to-accessibility-apple-continues-to-lead-in-awareness-and-innovation/#:~:text=for%20all%20users.-,Put%20another%20way%2C%20Apple%20products%20are%20inclusive%20by%20design.,their%20goals%2C%E2%80%9D%20said%20Herrlinger.>

<sup>8</sup> Sri Kurniawan, Andrew Arch, and Sean-Ryan Smith, 2019, “Ageing and Older Adults,” in Yeliz Yesilada and Simon Harper (eds.), *Web Accessibility, Human-Computer Interaction Series*, Springer, London, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4471-7440-0\\_6](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4471-7440-0_6).

<sup>9</sup> “The Global Economics of Disability 2020,” World Federation of Advertisers,

## 1. Enhanced branding

Focus on accessibility demonstrates a brand's core value and its commitment to social responsibility and inclusivity. Inclusivity and accessibility of products and services ensure that the organization is not isolating those who are vulnerable and is providing everybody equal opportunities to fulfill every basic need. By creating accessible web experiences, businesses are not just catering to people with disabilities but also creating a strong brand image and reputation—one that is built on the value of equality and diversity. As the digital landscape continues to pervade across the world, people across the board are choosing to stay loyal to and support brands that demonstrate those values.

Weaving accessibility into the business not only helps showcase brands' commitment toward inclusivity but also allows them to deliver outstanding user experience to everyone through rich and intuitive designs. As a result, it helps businesses build brand loyalty and create devoted brand advocates.

## 2. Better innovation and usability

While accessibility and innovation may sound as if they are at odds with each other, the truth is actually the opposite. Accessibility guidelines require clarity and rigor in navigation, which help address design and architectural barriers, thus paving the way for a more efficient and innovative design. Consider this: Accessible design thinking includes flexible, alternate, and multiple ways for users with limited abilities to interact with applications and websites. In the process, a website or app is designed with intuitive, contextual, user-friendly, and user-centric features that are useful for people with and without disabilities, which means it enhances overall usability. Designers can take advantage of intuitive, thoughtful, and functional accessible designs to create newer products that redefine accessibility and usability standards. Drawing a parallel to physical infrastructure is the case of the automatic door at supermarkets—originally designed to reduce entry barriers for differently abled people—that saved the day during the coronavirus pandemic.

An exemplary case in point of driving innovation with accessible design is Apple's products. They have been the leaders in innovative engineering and technology within the accessibility space right from the company's inception. Their relentless focus on developing born-accessible products has resulted in revolutionary innovations—including voice interactions that have paved the way for numerous digital assistants found in a range of smartphones, speakers, tablets, and computers.<sup>10</sup> These personal voice assistants are very widely used by millions of users regardless of their ability.



<https://wfanet.org/page/1210/2020/09/01/The-Global-Economics-of-Disability-2020#:~:text=A%20market%20bigger%20than%20China,and%20attracting%20the%20best%20talent.>

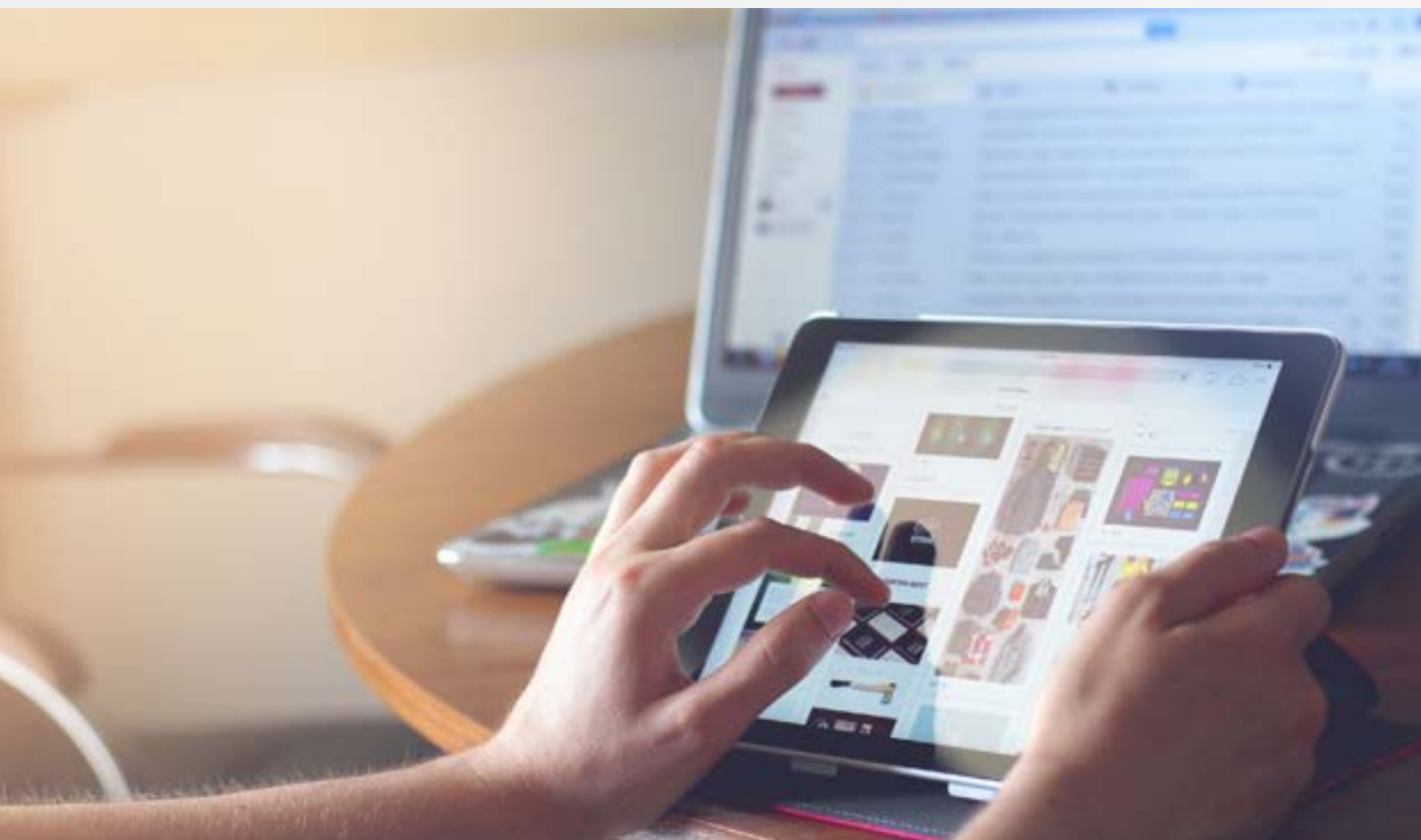
### 3. Extended market reach

As mentioned in prior sections, accessibility is not just for people with permanent physical or cognitive disabilities. It includes the increasing aging population (a demographic shift that is characterized by progressive functional and cognitive decline) and people with temporary impairments or limitations. There is also another subset that benefits from accessible design, and they are nonnative speakers who may have problems understanding the spoken accent.

Globally, the annual disposable income of disabled people is reported to be a staggering \$13 trillion. Web accessibility can help capitalize on untapped market opportunities.

This collective demographic represents a huge market. To put this in perspective, the market size for global assistive devices for the aging and disabled population was valued at \$23,009 million in 2018 and is predicted to go over \$35,000 million by 2026—a 5.5 percent compound annual growth rate (CAGR) from 2019 to 2026.<sup>11</sup> Also keep in mind that these statistics are based on reported numbers; the actual market size is way larger. Considering this fact, it only makes sound business sense to create products and content with inclusive design that is accessible by all. Web accessibility can not only help improve the online experience for every user but also enable businesses to expand their reach into new markets and tap into newer opportunities.

Seeing that every business has growth as its ultimate goal, embracing accessibility then becomes an imperative business strategy. It can help businesses reach more potential customers, gain market share, and drive greater business value through a demonstrated commitment to making their services and products more equitably accessible.



<sup>10</sup> "When It Comes to Accessibility, Apple Continues to Lead in Awareness and Innovation," TechCrunch, <https://techcrunch.com/2016/05/19/when-it-comes-to-accessibility-apple-continues-to-lead-in-awareness-and-innovation/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Global Elderly & Disabled Assistive Devices Market 2019–2026—ResearchAndMarkets.com," Business Wire, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20191001005625/en/Global-Elderly-Disabled-Assistive-Devices-Market-2019-2026---ResearchAndMarkets.com>.

## 4. Fulfilling legal obligations

Despite a rise in web accessibility litigations, many businesses still fail to integrate accessibility in its entirety. This is not to say that organizations are discriminating on purpose. But chances are that they simply did not get it right or failed to focus on creating accessible content and products that are compliant with WCAG standards. A couple of cautionary examples reiterate the fact that not paying attention to web accessibility can land businesses in hot water. The number of federal ADA Title III lawsuits approximately tripled, exceeding 2,250 lawsuits, in 2018<sup>12</sup>, while in 2019, the Supreme Court allowed blind people to sue Domino's Pizza and other retailers in case their websites were not accessible.<sup>13</sup>

Lawsuits and litigations are not only expensive but also pose a threat to brand reputation. By investing in web accessibility, businesses can avoid costly lawsuits as well as negative or bad press that hampers brand reputation and, in turn, the business itself in the long run. Given the cost and risk of inaction, ignoring accessibility can badly hurt any business.

## 5. Significant financial benefits

Untapped market opportunity, improved usability, superior product design, and accessible content reduce compliance cost and risk. Every benefit that has been discussed so far promises a range of direct and indirect financial benefits:

- **Untapped market opportunity:** With accessible design, designers can cater to an expansive market segment that has been historically ignored. Catering to this demographic itself holds tremendous potential for businesses—to not only extend market reach but, if done right and consistently, to also reap a huge ROI.
- **Mass market success with better design:** As we saw in prior sections, creating accessible digital assets with a target audience in mind always finds mass market success for their improved usability and functionality. From closed captions to voice assistants, every accessibility design has found immense mass market success within the general population for the convenience, flexibility, and functionality they've delivered.
- **Reduced legal expense:** Integrating accessibility features per WCAG guidelines reduces the risk of noncompliance. By making websites and apps accessible, companies can avoid potential lawsuits/litigation, thus reducing this risk as well as the costs involved in dealing with the same.



<sup>12</sup>“Number of Federal Website Accessibility Lawsuits Nearly Triple, Exceeding 2250 in 2018,” Seyfarth, <https://www.adatitleiii.com/2019/01/number-of-federal-website-accessibility-lawsuits-nearly-triple-exceeding-2250-in-2018/>.

<sup>13</sup>“Supreme Court Allows Blind People to Sue Retailers If Their Websites Are Not Accessible,” LA Times, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2019-10-07/blind-person-dominos-ada-supreme-court-disabled>.

## 6. Higher ranking, discoverability, and traffic

Accessibility enriches web content and the visibility of the brand and strengthens search engine optimization (SEO), lead generation and conversion, and ultimately, overall user experience. Google rewards websites that offer users a better user experience (UX) by making them more visible on their search results pages (SERPs) as against websites with a subpar UX. Seeing that accessible web design is user-centric, integrating these techniques helps provide an excellent user experience.

An effective SEO relies on content accuracy; it should align with user intent. According to Google, breaking the content into logical chunks is always advantageous.<sup>14</sup> From title and header tags, content hierarchy, and descriptive alt and anchor texts to schema markups and video transcripts, accessibility design automatically offers incredible opportunities to embed effective SEO techniques across various levels as per Google's requirements.

In other words, SEO and web accessibility are mutually beneficial; if your website is primed for all users regardless of their ability, it is primed for search engines as well. By integrating inclusive designs and making the content accessible, businesses can drastically improve their websites' organic ranking, discoverability, and performance.

### Realizing the Elusive ROI of Accessibility

Organizations have to realize that complying with WCAG accessibility guidelines does not have to be at odds with making digital assets accessible for every user. It is a step in the right direction. While businesses have to invest in accessibility, the resulting inclusivity and usability have the potential to offer a significant ROI in the long run. But more importantly, to derive a positive ROI, businesses need to be proactive in embracing accessibility and focus on embedding inclusive design in their products and services to deliver long-term value to their users/customers. Another factor is that accessibility as an afterthought is always more expensive; therefore organizations should aim to build accessible digital assets from the get-go. It is always more efficient and cost-effective to build accessibility into digital assets from the start, which results in better design and usability and born-accessible content.

The fact that organizations consider accessibility as a financial burden that hardly delivers any ROI is because more often than not businesses are integrating accessibility features in a phased manner simply to stay compliant. There has to be a shift in focus. Realizing ROI on any investment requires a concerted effort and a focused and strategic approach. Embracing accessibility is no different. The approach to accessibility should be driven by businesses' focus on catering to a larger market segment and driving consistent business value through an inclusive and equitable digital experience.



<sup>14</sup>"Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Starter Guide," Google Developers,

[https://developers.google.com/search/docs/beginner/seo-starter-guide?hl=en&visit\\_id=637490582979502719-2663699118&rd=1](https://developers.google.com/search/docs/beginner/seo-starter-guide?hl=en&visit_id=637490582979502719-2663699118&rd=1).

## Taking a Leaf Out of Digital Accessibility Success Stories

The earlier sections listed a few cautionary tales to help businesses understand the legal implications of noncompliance with digital accessibility guidelines. Now let's look at some case studies that provide real-world examples of how accessibility drives superior business value.

Barclays' approach to digital accessibility serves as an example of how companies should look at making it a fundamental aspect of their business model. Barclays realized that beyond inclusivity, there was also incredible commercial value attached in catering to the needs of market segment comprising the disabled and the elderly. Their holistic approach to digital accessibility resulted in several business benefits:<sup>15</sup>

- Award-winning talking ATMs that make it easy for people with a range of disabilities such as dyslexia and other age-related impairments to withdraw cash and transact using the cash machines. It also makes it simpler for other users who simply prefer to listen and follow instructions rather than read them.
- Hi-visibility debit cards and inclusion of voice biometrics for phone banking security and services.
- Voice biometrics is an alternative to conventional PIN-based security systems, which is challenging for many aging as well as disabled customers. It also delivers a broader benefit of simplifying access to services for every customer.

Any mention of real-world examples would be incomplete without talking about Apple's commitment toward developing born-accessible products and their unwavering commitment toward inclusivity.

The National Federation of the Blind commended Apple Inc. for its innovative "VoiceOver" application that they integrated early on during the development of their products. It is the world's first gesture-based screen reader designed to make the touchscreen interface fully accessible for people with visual impairments.<sup>16</sup>

Apple products, which have incredible accessibility features, are widely regarded as the best in the industry. The company has built itself as a niche brand through its expansive reach. Every year Apple celebrates Global Accessibility Awareness Day, when it showcases apps, accessories, content, and more—all of which are built keeping accessibility in mind and its impact on the larger society.<sup>17</sup>



<sup>15</sup> "Three Lessons from Barclays about Winning the Business Case for Accessibility," AbilityNet,

<https://www.abilitynet.org.uk/blog/three-lessons-barclays-about-winning-business-case-accessibility>.

<sup>16</sup> "National Federation of the Blind Commends Apple for Including VoiceOver on iPad," National Federation of the Blind, accessed February 17, 2021,

<https://www.nfb.org/index.php/about-us/press-room/national-federation-blind-commends-apple-including-voiceover-ipad>.

<sup>17</sup> "When It Comes to Accessibility, Apple Continues to Lead in Awareness and Innovation," TechCrunch,

<https://techcrunch.com/2016/05/19/when-it-comes-to-accessibility-apple-continues-to-lead-in-awareness-and-innovation/>.

## Creating a More Inclusive Digital World and Society at Large

According to WCAG standards, accessible designs should consider varying levels of impairment to address every barrier and ensure content is perceivable, understandable, operable, and robust for every user. By developing truly accessible content and products, organizations can empower every user—a powerful by-product of accessibility design thinking.

It is about time that businesses look at digital accessibility as any other technology trend that is on the rise. Rapid and pervasive digitization, which continues to advance, has compelled businesses from every sector to rethink their business models and digital strategies in order to cater to evolving customer and market demands and stay profitable. As our society continues to work toward building a more inclusive world, digital accessibility trends are only going to become stronger and bigger. While equal access to information and services should be good enough reason for integrating accessibility, a well-thought out accessible design goes beyond inclusivity and has the potential to be a game changer. Organizations that are proactive in embracing digital accessibility as a fundamental part of their business model will reap both tangible and intangible benefits, while ensuring their digital strategy is equitable and future ready.



## ABOUT AMNET

Amnet is a Technabled Services company with 20 years of experience. For publishers and content aggregators needing reliable and efficient publishing services, Amnet provides technology-led, end-to-end services and solutions. Amnet's relationship-centered, customer-obsessed approach provides the client with the certainty of meeting their requirements and to provide compelling value.

For companies that need to make their content accessible, Amnet provides born accessible content and also remediates existing content. Amnet helps clients to stay ahead of the curve and take part in enabling digital equality in compliance with regulatory requirements such as ADA, WCAG 2.1 and Section 508. Amnet is a Benetech certified accessible vendor.

## Accessibility Resource Center

To accelerate our initiative of digital equality, we have created a not-for-profit Accessibility Resource Center.

[www.theaccessibilityresourcecenter.org](http://www.theaccessibilityresourcecenter.org)

Users access this portal to utilize free and valuable "do it yourself" tools and to stay abreast of the latest guidelines.



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