Why is digital accessibility so important?

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Introduction

Hello, I'm Susi Miller from eLaHub and I'm going to be taking you through some of the key things you need to know about digital accessibility and specifically accessible eLearning. In this video I'm going to be answering the question: Why is digital accessibility so important?

One of the most striking things I've found when I deliver digital accessibility training and consultancy, is that the majority of people I talk to, are only vaguely aware of the reasons why they should be making resources accessible.

Most people do seem to genuinely believe that digital accessibility is the right thing to do, and they are aware that there are some laws and regulations they should know about, but there is still a lot of uncertainty around the subject.

So in this video I'm going to explain the legal requirements and also give you some facts and quotes about disability and digital accessibility, which I use in my training. I hope they will help convince you of the importance of making online resources accessible.

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1. Legal obligation

I'm going to start by looking at the legislation that you need to be aware of which makes it a legal obligation to make all digital resources accessible. I'm going to focus on the legislation which is relevant for a UK audience, but you will find useful links to legislation in other countries at eLaHub.net

International legislation

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

One of the most important pieces of legislation that you need to be aware of is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This was ratified by the UK in 2009, and is extremely significant because it is the legislation which defines that access to all information, and this very important for us, including digital information is a basic human right. Effectively what it means is that if we do not make our digital resources, including eLearning, accessible we are denying our learners their human rights.

UK legislation

United Kingdom Equality Act

The next piece of legislation that you need to be aware of is the UK Equality Act, which was passed in 2010. The significant thing to know about this legislation is the fact that all organisations have an "**anticipatory duty**" to make reasonable adjustments for people with impairments. In other words, it is not enough to wait until someone with an impairment tells us they have a requirement, we legally have to make sure that all of our resources, and again this includes eLearning resources, can meet the accessibility needs of all of our learners as standard.

Public Sector Bodies (Websites & Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations

And finally, an extremely important piece of legislation which, although originally based on an EU directive, was passed into UK law in September 2018. This legislation applies to all Public Sector organisations,

further and higher education institutions and some charities, and of course any business who supplies digital content to these organisations. Although the legislation is specifically called the Public Sector Bodies Websites and Mobile Applications Accessibility Regulations it actually includes all digital content, including any documents published online – for example any Word, PowerPoint or PDF documents. It also includes all eLearning resources.

One of the most significant things about this new legislation is that it refers to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines – version 2.1. levels A and AA as the standard which must be met in order to comply.

There are exemptions to these regulations which you can find out more about on the GOV.UK site. One of the most important to be aware of is that any content held on intranets is currently exempt, but only until the intranet undergoes a major revision.

Since this legislation was introduced in September 2018, there is currently a transition period where organisations have time to make their digital resources accessible, but there are some key compliance dates that you need to be aware of.

The first date to be aware of is September 2019. By this date any online content which was created after the law was passed i.e. anything created after September 2018, has to comply with WCAG 2.1 regulations.

The next date to be aware of is September 2020. This is the date any online content which was created before the law was passed, so basically it is the deadline for all online content to comply with WCAG 2.1 regulations.

And finally, June 2021 is the deadline for all mobile applications to become compliant.

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So, I hope you agree that the legal requirements alone make a compelling case for the need for digital accessibility, including accessible eLearning. If you're still not convinced, or need more evidence to persuade others, I hope that the following facts and quotes might be helpful.

2. Social responsibility

Let's look first at the issue of social responsibility, which becomes even more compelling when we understand how many people in the UK population have a disability or permanent impairment.

Out of population of approximately 66 million people in the UK, how many do you think are disabled?

1. 3 million
2. 7 million
3. 13 million

Let's have a look. The correct answer is 13 million. So, in a population of 66 million this means that potentially one in five of our learners has a permanent impairment.

While this might be surprising to many people, I think one thing which definitely would not be surprising is the fact that currently those 13 million people do not have equal opportunities to thrive and succeed in our society.

A 2016 report by the UK equality and human rights commission concluded:

"Now is the time for a new national focus on the rights of the 13 million disabled people who live in Britain. They must not be treated less favourably than any other citizens."

At eLaHub, we believe that making all eLearning accessible is an important step in allowing people with permanent impairments to thrive and succeed.

3. Future proofing

Another compelling reason for making eLearning accessible is due to one of the most important demographic trends in our time, which we can learn more about by looking at our next question:

In the UK there are currently 11.8 million people over 65. How many will there be in 2066?

1. 14.5 million
2. 16.4 million or
3. 20.4 million

And the answer is 20.4 million.

But why is this so important? Firstly, because it will have a profound impact on the future workforce, but also because it has the potential to affect everyone, of us. One of our favourite quotes at eLaHub is from Professor Mike Wald from the University of Southampton.
"Everybody can think of themselves as only temporarily not having a disability, because at some point in their life, as they get older, they will have some sort of disability."

So, by making our eLearning accessible we are, in effect, future proofing it for a significant proportion of future learners, including ourselves.

4. Competitive advantage

Our next reason could be considered the 'What's in it for me?' from a commercial perspective. Again, we'll start with a question.

What is the estimated spending power of families with at least one disabled person in Britain?

1. £200 million
2. £200 billion
3. £300 billion

And the answer is

£200 billion.

Business are becoming increasingly aware of the economic significance of people with disabilities. Two great examples of this are Microsoft who have long lagged behind Apple in terms of a focus on accessibility but are now making significant efforts to improve their products and services, and Barclays whose mission it is to become the most accessible company in the FTSE 100 index. In both cases, it is commercial factors which are driving this focus.

As Mike McLane, Head of Diversity and Inclusion at Barclays says, *"Our inclusive strategy gives us a concrete competitive advantage."*

5. Better design

Our final reason could be considered the 'what's in it for me' from a design perspective. No question this time, just a quote from Justin Trudeau

"Diversity is the engine of invention. It generates activity that enriches the world."

From my own experience as an instructional designer and eLearning developer, I would be lying if I said that designing for accessibility is always straightforward. But designing for accessibility definitely makes you think about things in a different way and by accommodating learners with diverse needs, you undoubtedly become a better designer.

Conclusion

In this video I've looked at, why, at eLaHub, we think digital accessibility is so important. If you agree, or want to find out more, visit us at eLaHub.net.