

ADA Compliance: Addressing the challenge in financial services

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Many financial institutions are struggling with understanding the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and, more importantly, what needs to be done to be deemed compliant. This article is intended to provide information, recommendations and key criteria for recognizing the value in addressing accessibility of websites, software, and documents.

What is the ADA?

"The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities similar to those provided to individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, State and local government services, and telecommunications." ¹

Providing the same level of access to individuals with disabilities as those without is a broad charter. We often focus on the physical aspects in terms of access to structures, and equal-opportunity employment. However, the appropriate use of technology is equally important in ensuring the needs of those with disabilities is addressed.

Why should I care?

Let's look at some statistics:

- 3.3 million Americans over the age of 40 are blind or have low-vision ². In the next decade, that number is expected to surpass 5 million ²
- 21 million Americans have profound visual impairment that require large-print documents ²
- In Canada, the cost of vision-loss in 2008 was over 4 billion, mainly due to loss of employment and productivity ³
- In the UK, 4% of the population have a vision-related problem ⁴

If we examine a financial services organization with 2.5 million customers, they would have approximately 25,000 customers requiring accessibility. ⁵

These individuals could be your customers, partners, friends or family. Often, vision-impaired individuals will use assistive technologies to access information on a computer. Assistive technologies range from screen readers, which read documents out loud, to text-only browsers and websites to Braille printers. In order for these devices to work, documents and websites have to be built with their accessibility in mind.

The visually-impaired community is a very active one. Most individuals are over the age of 40, and represent a large group of consumers using many products and services. These individuals have income, and are spending money. They have bank accounts, credit cards and savings. Without proper accessibility, they cannot access information or purchase products and services.

How does this relate to technology?

The World Wide Web Consortium ([W3C](#)) has developed guidelines for technology products called Web Content Accessibility Guidelines ([WCAG](#)). When it comes to accessibility in technology, there are four principles to keep in mind. Everything should be built to be:

1. Perceivable
2. Operable
3. Understandable
4. Robust

Websites, software products and electronic documents need to be built with these guidelines in mind so that they can work with assistive technologies. For example, in the case of PDF files, pictures need alternative text and read order has to be defined, along with any special tables, forms and language selection.

Financial services firms often provide the required information via large-print or Braille statements, typically using an outsourced document accessibility service. While this can be acceptable in the short-term, it poses risks and creates additional costs as the number of these users grows over time. These special statements are typically only available upon request, and can take up to an additional 48 hours to process. We recommend looking at longer-term, high-volume technology solutions which can provide the same information in accessible formats, so that customers can have access to the data on-demand. In other words, your customers should be able to access their data when, where and how they want it.

What are my options for compliance?

Accessibility should be part of every organization's strategy, not just a one-time special project. It is an ongoing commitment that has to filter down to every layer of an enterprise. Recommendations are as follows:

- **Executive support.** It does not need to be a full-time job, however someone has to lead the charge and drive change internally. If the executive team is resistant, they may be easily swayed at the thought of being sued for not meeting accessibility guidelines, or customer attrition due to non-compliance.
- **Project plan.** You won't be fully accessible overnight, and in the case of software products it may be a multi-year strategy. Make a list of all the accessibility issues and start with the small items first. Plan around larger issues as appropriate and leave room for change and scalability.
- **Collaborate.** A cross-functional team representing all business units should actively communicate. The key is to demonstrate consistent improvement and an organization's commitment to the long-term goal of full accessibility.
- **Websites.** Large financial institutions may not have the luxury, budget or timeframe to re-write entire websites to meet accessibility guidelines. In the interim, as long as the information is available in an accessible format, this can provide a "quick fix" until the larger issues are addressed. As an example, a text-only version of the website, or even a separate link which provides the same information usable by assistive technologies, is an acceptable interim solution.

Where can I find more information?

There are thousands of financial services organizations in the United States and worldwide, who only take an active interest in this issue after being sued. A good first step is to review the [W3C WCAG](#) Guidelines.

There are also a number of accessibility consultants who can alleviate the burden of understanding and planning for compliance. They typically offer assessments of your product, service or website, and can even do most of the work if needed.

The Bottom Line

Accessibility should be part of the planning process in just about everything you do. Don't be overwhelmed by negative press, or the scope of what could potentially be a massive project. Baby steps are better than no steps at all. Your customers will notice the differences, no matter how big or small, and since they are active in their own community – people will hear the positive news!

Last but not least, it's the right thing to do. Positive press around accessible companies will not hurt your bottom-line, and as regulations become stronger with more enforcement, you can get ahead of your competitors and lead the charge.

1 Americans with Disabilities Act website
2 National Eye Institute
3 Canadian National Institute for the Blind
4 Royal National Institute of Blind People
5 Xenos Document Storage Reduction Whitepaper