



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Raegan Bartlo, VP of Communications

Phone: 202-919-6216

Email: raegan.bartlo@user1st.com

A Lesser Known Impact of COVID-19: People with Disabilities May Be Denied Access to Online Resources

By Amihai Miron, CEO User1st

The digital transformation accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic shines a spotlight on the inability of websites and other media to provide people with disabilities access to online and essential goods, services, and information. With current and forecasted increases in the use of online resources due to social distancing requirements and concerns, businesses and organizations should update their digital assets to ensure digital accessibility.

Soon we will celebrate thirty years since the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which originally opened physical doorways for the disability community. Today's doorways are digital and the ADA, as well as several other civil rights laws, apply to your digital assets. More importantly, ensuring access to goods, services, and information for people with disabilities is not only the right thing to do but can also have a positive impact on your organization.

What is digital accessibility?

Digital accessibility is the ability of a website, mobile application, or electronic document to be easily navigated and understood by all users of varied abilities, including those who have visual, auditory, motor, or cognitive disabilities. Unfortunately, most websites and other digital assets were not created with accessibility in mind, blocking users with disabilities from using your online resources and apps, narrowing your organization's customer base, and leaving your organization vulnerable to reputation and legal risk.

Under normal circumstances, access to essential services – food, education, finance, and healthcare – demand a high level of connectivity. Largely fueled by the coronavirus pandemic, the demand for online resources has exponentially increased. For people with disabilities, the ability to access content and transact business through a website or mobile application is extremely challenging, demanding that web accessibility become a focus.

From Banks to Food, Education to Health Care: Accessibility in the COVID-19 Environment

According to the latest data from Adobe's Digital Economy Index, U.S. e-commerce jumped 49% in April, compared to the beginning of March with grocery services leading the pack. Instacart, for example, shows [increased profits](#) selling approximately \$700 million worth of groceries during the first two weeks of April, up 450% over its December 2019 sales. However, even sites such as Instacart, with the best intentions to serve all customers, may not realize they have accessibility problems. [User1st](#) performed manual and automated testing of Instacart's website and found errors that may present difficulties for a person with a disability.

Online banking, which was already on the rise, has also been impacted by the coronavirus. A [survey by Lightico](#) notes that 63% of banking customers said they were more inclined to try a new digital app for banking than before the pandemic with 82% having concerns of visiting their local banks. Everyone needs access to monitor their finances. They need to pay bills. Homeowners may be applying for refinancing or forbearance on their loans. And with millions of adults in the United States having some type of visual, hearing, or other disability impacting their use of digital media, they may be blocked from performing such banking activities online.

Digital accessibility can ensure hospitals and health centers reach every patient in need, especially those with disabilities. The consumer movement to online health services was also rising prior to the coronavirus. A United Healthcare survey reveals that 83% of users visit a hospital website before scheduling an appointment and 39% of consumers expect to use online consultations with their doctors. But many of these digital assets were not designed with accessibility in mind. Without digital accessibility, their health providers' website, patient portal, or mobile app could block them from making an appointment or finding the location of a health facility.

The coronavirus has thrust the need for digital accessibility in education to the forefront of education administrators' and teachers' curriculums throughout the U.S. There are over 13,600 public school districts trying to care for 7.5 million students with special needs. With 124,000 K-12 schools closed, educators are scrambling for online accessibility for these students. For colleges and universities, the shift to online learning has been steadily increasing over 14 years. With more than 250 higher education institutions closed for the foreseeable future, these closures have only accelerated the need for accessible online services for the 20% of students with disabilities.

The Risks

Besides alienating a significant percentage of people from using your digital assets, there are several additional risks of not being digitally accessible to people with disabilities, namely litigation and its costs, potential monetary damages and penalties, and reputational harm. In just the first quarter of 2020 alone, more than 500 digital accessibility lawsuits have been filed. A [recent article](#) by Fox Rothschild LLC notes the critical importance of business websites and mobile apps being digitally accessible to persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their obligations under Title III of the ADA. While the coronavirus and court closures may have temporarily slowed the trend of digital accessibility lawsuits, increased online use during the pandemic make for a ripe accessibility lawsuit atmosphere. Indeed, COVID-19 related digital accessibility lawsuits are already beginning to emerge.

Further, several civil rights laws could apply in addition to the ADA. For example, some lawsuits involving homes and properties have cited violations of the Fair Housing Act for inaccessible digital assets. Depending on whether your organization receives federal funding, you could be subject to other federal laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Health providers could be subject to Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act. And then there is the addition of state laws such as California's Unruh Act. Consult with your in-house counsel on which laws could apply to your organization. Compounding these legal statutes and the amount of time in court, the costs of litigation can greatly increase compared to the cost of digital accessibility.

The Rewards

Taking a pro-active approach to digital accessibility does not only mitigate risk and protect your organization's reputation, but it provides substantial organizational benefits. [The purchasing power of the online dollar has increased by nearly 28%](#) over the past six years. Organizations with accessible digital assets can increase their SEO, which translates to more traffic and the potential for more revenue. In a report on disability inclusion from Disability:IN and Accenture, companies that lead in disability inclusion apparently have 28% higher revenue and 30% improved profit margins. Digital accessibility demonstrates your willingness to go beyond the law for a truly inclusive online experience. It will reduce abandonment rates, helping you maintain loyal customer interaction. Your organization becomes a very reliable source to the disability community.

As states begin to reopen, a large portion of the population will still heavily rely upon online resources. There has never been a better time to take on digital accessibility. Without digital accessibility, your website is broken. It is blocking people with disabilities from accessing the essential services needed for everyone, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. Open your digital door to people with disabilities to provide an inclusive and beneficial experience for you and your customers.

#