

Digital accessibility and why it matters

 By [Tasneem Cassim](#)

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"Accessibility" in the digital space means that digital platforms, like websites, mobile apps, social channels and PDFs, should be readable, operable and functional to all users - especially people with disabilities.



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It's an issue that is rapidly gaining attention in many spheres, including social, economic and legal domains. Accessibility is part of diversity and inclusion conversations, it's on the legal agenda in the US, the policy landscape in the UK and it is also coming to the fore in the emerging tech, digital transformation and new digital economy space.

Many people are willing to talk about accessibility and how important it is, but are brands doing enough to be inclusive to everyone? And 'everyone' includes people with disabilities who may be blind, deaf, dyslexic or struggle to access the digital space in a myriad of other ways.

If an organisation is creating content that is inaccessible for people with disabilities, they are essentially excluding [15% of the world's population](#).

Digital accessibility in South Africa

[South Africa has about 3 million people living with disabilities](#), which equates to 7.5% of the country's population. People with disabilities make up approximately [5-15% of the population in low- and middle-income countries](#), such as South Africa. This means that they may require assistive devices and technologies to access digital spaces. Because the cost of smartphones and other assistive devices are often prohibitively high, digital content is automatically inaccessible to many citizens.

In [the US](#), a more robust and evolved landscape drives and even mandates accessibility standards - 74% of people with disabilities in the US have a cell phone, 54% of these people use the Internet and 47% of them own a desktop computer.

South Africa is still well behind when it comes to implementing laws and guidelines to ensure that people living with disabilities have access to information and content online.

However, we could see this changing soon...

Digital transformation in Africa has gradually become a key focus, especially since the pandemic has accelerated transformation and brought to light inequalities when it comes to Internet access. With Covid-19 continuing to progress in South Africa, there has been growing concern that people with disabilities are taking a backseat when it comes to accessing information on the disease. This is because many people with disabilities face digital exclusion due to a lack of accessibility to and affordability of ICT tools and equipment, as well as a failure by broadcasters and telecom operators to provide information and services in accessible formats.

As much as Covid-19 has accelerated digital transformation for some, it has highlighted conversations around accessibility for Africans living with disabilities who can't access vital information about the pandemic

International organisations, such as the [World Health Organisation](#), are placing pressure on countries to improve accessibility, therefore it's inevitable that South Africa will need to implement policies and enact stricter laws that prevent these inequalities when it comes to accessing information.

Why inclusive accessibility is important to businesses

It's essential for brands that are positioning themselves as drivers of digital transformation to evaluate the extent to which their "transformation" excludes some of their customers. Digital transformation has the potential to benefit businesses and society as a whole, so it's important for organisations to push transformation that also considers marginalised groups.

Businesses need to embrace technologies and inclusive processes if they want the widest possible audience to feel included. Brands and businesses claim they target the masses, but do they really? [A recent survey](#) shows that, of the 120 brands that participated, 90% know that disability inclusion is the right thing to do, but only 20% had a global strategy for disability inclusion.

Brands cannot showcase one disability-focused campaign every two years and state that they are inclusive. Inclusivity needs to be an 'always on' consideration. When content is being produced, brands need to think about people who may not be able to see, read or hear. How will these people access and consume the content?

Making content accessible to all

There are many ways that businesses can make their digital content more inclusive and accessible.



IAB SA campaigns for all South Africans to have free access to the internet

18 May 2018



When building a website, keep in mind that people with visual impairments should also be able to use it. Consider how

perceivable the website is, how operable the site will be with a keyboard, if it works with zoom and screen readers and whether a visually impaired reader will be able to understand what is going on while they navigate.

On social media, always think about how people with hearing and visual impairments will experience your content. Making this content accessible might be as simple as adding alt text, captions or a voiceover.

Here are some tips for making your digital platform or website user friendly for people with disabilities:

- Make allowances for enlarged text.
- Use contrast and be mindful of colours for action items.
- Let desktop users browse your mobile site.
- Use keyboard shortcuts to aid navigation.
- Ensure it's compatible with screen magnifiers, screen readers and speech recognition tech.
- Use readability formulas to estimate how difficult your text is to read.

Digital accessibility has always been an important issue to people with disabilities, but as the topic receives more attention from interest groups and ordinary citizens, it's something that all brands need to put on their agendas. Creating a more inclusive society will benefit businesses and customers alike, and brands that are outed as not caring about digital accessibility will have reputational damage to contend with.

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