

The power of accessibility for business: why it should be a priority from the get-go

In today's bustling startup landscape, where innovation takes centre stage, one critical aspect often lags behind: accessibility. While digital, creative, and business teams surge ahead, accessibility is sometimes seen as an obstacle to future success.

This type of thinking is a mistake: prioritising accessibility from the get-go is not only a moral imperative, but a key component to innovation and growth. Across the world, we're seeing a positive push for a more inclusive, equitable society, and businesses need to get on board with this movement to retain customers and talent, capture market share, and avoid potential legal issues.

The perceived risks

For many, there is a perception that accessibility can mean stifling innovation or inflating costs. There's a false notion that navigating accessibility is overly complex and requires expensive consultants, and public standards, such as the WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines), can seem like a daunting technical jigsaw puzzle.

Yet, relegating accessibility to the back burner or adopting a quick-fix checklist mentality can lead to greater expenses later down the line. While risk and market access shouldn't be the core drivers of striving towards a more inclusive future, they are essential drivers for change in business. Not considering the barriers faced by customers with diverse needs right from the start can embed inequalities into the structure of the business. Not only could this mean missing out on a substantial market segment, but it could potentially lead to a company coming up against accessibility legislation.

Consider this: if you venture into the US market with a non-compliant website, you could end up forking out a hefty fine – roughly £10,000 – due to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In Europe, various standards apply across different aspects of your business, from website design to product labels.

Unleashing creativity

Prioritising accessibility can be a game-changer for creativity and innovation, and sometimes lead to surprising added benefits. Take screen readers, for example. Initially designed for non-sighted users, they've become indispensable tools for many people dealing with mountains of content. And Google's voice control tool? While it was originally intended for users with physical impairments, now, millions are accessing information via voice-controlled assistants when they need to be hands-free.

The luxury carmaker Ferrari recently found success with more accessible design. Recognising the ageing demographics of its consumer base, Ferrari adjusted its product design to become more inclusive without compromising its iconic style. The result? They not only kept loyal customers but also attracted new audiences who might have otherwise been excluded by design.

While some companies are able to retroactively improve their accessibility, they are often able to do so because they are big businesses with sizeable resources. Startups and smaller businesses don't necessarily have this luxury, nor can they afford to be behind the innovation curve when entering competitive markets. This is why they must prioritise accessibility right from the start.

These examples show that thinking about the needs of a broader group of people with different lived experiences can open new avenues of opportunity and creativity. Accessibility isn't subtractive; it's additive. Constraints, as it turns out, can make things more interesting.

Getting proactive

Businesses often underestimate how they might inadvertently exclude certain individuals. Our brains tend to favour confirmation bias, making it easier to craft solutions based on our own experiences.

To get ahead when thinking about inclusion, start by questioning your assumptions about your target audience. Engage with a diverse range of people early in the customer research phase. Remember the mantra from the disability rights community: “Nothing about us without us.” This is evidenced in the case of Braille vs. Boston Line Type. One was created by a blind person and turned out to be a game-changer for the visually impaired, the other was created first but by a fully-sighted person, it is now unknown to most of the world. More recently, while collaborating with Player Research on its new ‘Advancing Accessibility’ service proposition, involving the community ensured that there was transparency around their intentions from the start, but also enabled us to gain vital insights beyond our own experience that shaped its go-to-market strategy.

Consider organising behavioural science workshops for your team to help counteract unconscious biases that inadvertently seep into the decision-making process. Addressing factors like groupthink, status quo, and framing can help everyone stay on an unbiased path. In similar ways to businesses now having a mental health champion, an accessibility champion could also be incredibly helpful: someone whose job it is to challenge, add insight and prevent people from falling back into old biases.

An empathetic approach

Ultimately, it’s about taking a proactive and open approach, imbued with humility that values progress over perfection, rather than treating accessibility as a dreaded checkbox. Even those who accept that accessibility needs to be a consideration will often treat it as a task with predefined standards to meet – but that’s not the way to go. Accessibility and inclusivity should become part of your business’s DNA: every time you roll out something new or iterate something – whether it’s a website update, an app, or a product – accessibility should be woven right in.

Businesses that embrace accessibility from day one ensure it becomes part of their identity as they grow, creating a culture of inclusivity, equity and innovation. The benefits extend far beyond avoiding legal penalties: it enhances user experiences for all and expands market reach. It’s high time we recognise that accessibility isn’t a roadblock; it’s a pathway to opportunity.

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