



# Making Accessibility Part of Your Content Workflow

IDEA: A commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility

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## Introduction

It's clear that without content, your brand will have very little engagement. What are people going to connect with? Interact with? Share? Like? You have to think about these things as you build brand content because, without engagement, your organization is not likely to experience any positive growth.

As you're creating content and posting it on your social media accounts, in emails, and most importantly, on your website, you have to ask yourself another question: **is this content accessible?**

*"Accessibility focuses on how a disabled person accesses or benefits from a site, system or application. Accessibility is an important part of designing and should be considered throughout the development process."*

Whatever your answer is, chances are that your content workflows can build in more accessibility practices. Creating engaging content is one thing—ensuring that content is something your target audience finds accessible is another thing entirely. So, how do you make accessibility part of your content workflow?

Let's take a step back and ask another question:

## Why do it?

One of the great things about the Internet is its accessibility. All you need is a connection and boom: Internet access. You can buy, sell, watch videos, read articles and blogs, share content, schedule and post images, videos, audio, and more from your smartphone or computer. While this is certainly an amazing tool that connects us all, the reality is that it doesn't always connect us *all*.

**Worldwide, there are 2.2 billion people with disabilities.** This means that over a billion people do not have total, equal access to all the content your brand has to offer. Some live with visual impairments that make navigating websites and image-heavy apps like Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok difficult. Others may be living with hearing impairments, which make some accessibility tools on smartphones and computers (like screen-reading software or auto-captions) almost useless. When organizations fail to recognize the different needs that members of their target audience may be living with and experiencing, it can alienate thousands of customers and lead to serious issues—like lawsuits.

Consider the [Domino's Pizza Case](#): In 2019, the Supreme Court denied a petition from Domino's Pizza to hear whether the pizza giant's website is required to be accessible to the disabled. The case in question was first brought forth by Guillermo Robles, a blind man who sued Domino's after he could not order a meal on the website *and* the mobile app despite screen-reading software. The Court's decision not to grant the case is a loss for the company and "a win for disability advocates," who have often argued that when businesses are not required to maintain accessible sites, then people with disabilities could (and usually are) left out of "substantial portions of the economy."

In addition to being harmful financially, a lack of accessibility can also generate poor PR. Like in the Domino's Pizza case, it was found that the restaurant chain had violated the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), alienating thousands of customers who may share Robles' impairment or live with others.

Making accessibility part of your content workflow is part of being a modern, progressive, mission-driven organization. Companies and organizations that fail to think of their clientele with disabilities effectively exclude them from the table and isolate them. In the same way, buildings are required to have ramps for persons in wheelchairs, alternatives to stairs, and other accommodations, inclusion must be a primary consideration in your organization right from the start, especially because it's not obvious who may be affected by vision and hearing impairments or other disabilities. Your friends, family members, clients, colleagues, and even your superiors may be affected, and you could even be affected one day!

## Accessibility could be a need for someone on your team – maybe even you!

During the summer of 2017, while I worked for a large nonprofit, preparing the finishing touches on the organization's digital annual report, I was stricken with sudden vision loss. Vision in the center of my right eye was compromised. Reading paragraph body text at the size I'd grown accustomed to was a painful challenge. My brain had to re-train itself, compensating by taking in more visual cues from my "mostly good" left eye. I learned how to navigate the content management system as a content editor, increasing text sizes exponentially while learning to use a screen reader. I learned how to use dictation (speech-to-text) to write emails, to compensate for the lack of options within my email tool to make composing content easier as my eye condition made glaring white screens painful to interact with. During presentations, I was embarrassed to ask colleagues to increase spreadsheets by 200% just so I could participate. The availability of accessibility controls, shortcuts and tools in my daily workflow felt limited. While I had some control over my computer's text size preferences, the screen on my aging PC laptop was too dark and lacked the necessary contrast for me to decipher light gray captions. Enabling dark mode on my smartphone and tablet gave me hope. The operating systems on those devices provided options to read easier, keep producing, contributing and learning. Luckily, the content management system I worked with daily had recently been rebuilt on accessibility best practices ([Drupal CMS](#)). My frustration and stress were manageable as long as I could do most of my work within Drupal. Drupal was a safe environment that provided many options to help my vision impairment and increase my productivity on terms I had control over.

Accessibility is not just about the end-user; it can (and should) be available to content creators. One day you (or someone on your team) may rely on it!

### Four common challenges with implementing accessibility:

You know why accessibility is so important and why you should do it—now for the actual doing. Changing the way you manage and curate your content workflow is always challenging, but making accessibility a bigger part of it (especially where it wasn't one before) can be a tall order if you don't know what you're up against. So what are **four common challenges with implementing accessibility**?

#### 1. Time: Time to learn, time to test, time to fail and time to improve

One of the biggest challenges you'll face when implementing accessibility is time: time to learn, rest, fail, and improve. It may feel like you're racing against the clock

when you think about all the organizations competing for your potential customers, but this is a harmful way to think. When trying to keep up or catch up with others, you risk cutting corners and letting down clients with disabilities by not taking the extra care necessary to ensure quality. You aren't going to get it on the first try and that's okay. Thankfully, resources are available to you (more on that below!) to help you learn the best ways to implement accessibility—some even built right into social media apps.

## 2. Support: Backing from leadership and executives

It may seem like a no-brainer to make your brand's content inclusive and accessible, but the road forward may not always be smooth. Leadership may not always be on board with conforming to ADA requirements and without backing from higher-ups, it can be a lot more difficult to make accessibility part of your content workflow. In the case of Domino's Pizza, leadership and execs chose to fight the lawsuit Robles brought against them rather than make the necessary changes to meet the needs of customers with disabilities. To avoid this challenge, make a point of showing your team how important it is, ethically as well as financially, to include people with disabilities at the table when it comes to content creation and distribution. If you happen to be assessing a new tool for your content contributors, ask the vendor how they handle accessibility on the back-end. How does the CRM behave with screen readers? Can the text size be increased easily? Is a switch to the dark mode or high contrast an easy option? How does the system behave when using a screen reader (conversely, speech-to-text?) By neglecting to implement technological advancements for people with disabilities, you are effectively shutting out a major part of your client base.

## 3. Connection: Understanding & Empathy

Part of garnering support from leadership and execs is showing the importance of making a connection. When creating their marketing strategies and content workflows, many people don't immediately think about people with disabilities. They simply don't consider this community or who may be a part of it in their target audience— or even whether they could be a part of the community one day! Understanding and empathy are the connectors that will help organizations not just connect with their current and potential customers but condition them to be more sensitive to the diverse experiences of others so that accessibility is inherently built into content creation and marketing moving forward.

## 4. Consistency: Making good habits permanent

The final challenge facing organizations trying to implement more accessibility into their workflow is consistency. It's easy to get caught up in a cause when it's all over the news and trending on social media. But what about when the dialogue dies and the world talks about something else? In this shift, many organizations abandon the new practices they've adopted to move on to the next "trending cause" which shows a tremendous lack of understanding, empathy, and respect for various communities.

With this in mind, your organization has to make the good habits they're implementing permanent. This means keeping accessibility tools so that your websites, social media, blogs, articles, apps remain accessible to people with disabilities. In short, you want this community (as well as all others) as top of mind as the average customer.

## Change is hard!

As a final word of encouragement before we move on, remember that change is hard! These transitions will take some time and that's okay. So long as your organization is committed to being better and more inclusive and sticks with the work, you can be sure to see positive, progressive change in just a matter of time.

## Accessibility can't be an afterthought

[Accessibility testing](#) is a good strategy for catching accessibility issues after they happen, but what can you do to prevent them in the first place?

"More than 60% of accessibility issues occur during the design phase."

Shine a light on your organization: How does Tim's quote below translate to content creation?

"Build benevolent, kind, accessible and trustworthy systems."  
—Tim Berners Lee

## Assess your engagement platforms and content creation processes!

- Web content production: Could a disabled staff person contribute content easily to your website? What are the hurdles within your CMS?
- Social Media imagery: Do you use alt text or platforms that promote alternative text (like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn)? Do you use flattened copy or embedded text on digital assets like JPEGs, PNGs, and GIFs? Look at the full scope image and visual tools [here](#).
- Email Marketing: It's easy and fast to embed text inside images, but is that behavior contributing to less inclusiveness in your messaging? How does a disabled person absorb an event invite that has important details embedded within a flattened image and no alt-text?
- Data Visualizations and Infographics: Are yours too complex and difficult to explain with words? Are you overusing similar colors? What's the contrast ratio/readability of your dashboards?

- Reports, PDF's and other portable publications: Can they be understood and navigated with text-to-speech tools?
- Back-end administration of systems and applications: What's the experience like for authoring and publishing tools? Can the text size be increased without limiting functionality? Does the admin console have options for dark mode or high contrast?
- Advertising and Marketing: Are you actively limiting intrusive advertising from your outreach— (e.g. – modal pop-ups, restrictive overlays, auto-playing videos vs. more passive approaches such as search engine marketing)?  
Modern digital advertising can be intrusive and annoying for folks with perfect vision and hearing. They can be even more disruptive, frustrating and hard to navigate for those with vision or hearing impairments.

## What are some tools & behaviors that can help?

- **The AIY Project** – A community-driven effort to make digital accessibility easier.
- **The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)** – This is a great place to learn the standards, requirements, success criteria, and techniques on your website to ensure your online content is easy to use and engage with people with disabilities
- **Google's Inclusive Marketing** toolkit delves into extensive accessibility topics, from assistive devices to event design
- **The Accessible Social** website is a free resource hub for digital marketers, content creators, communications professionals, and everyday social media users to make their social media content more accessible. You can learn how to make audio and video more accessible, copy and format images and visuals, and much more
- **Colorblind Accessibility Manifesto** practical design choices that consider the needs of people with color blindness
- **Five Most Annoying Website Features** faced by a blind person. A short but informative blog post
- **Screen Readers** Screen reader software programs are available for blind or visually impaired people. Test your content using a screen reader (and by the way, this is good practice – use Voiceover (iOS) or Talkback (Android) on your phone for a good experience), so you can quickly identify and find issues on individual pieces of content that can be addressed more systematically
- **Adaptive learning** This teaching and learning methodology helps to personalize lessons, practice activities, reading, and assessments to help users in real-time. This option allows you to commit to small steps in sprints or timeboxed blocks as you create your content workflow

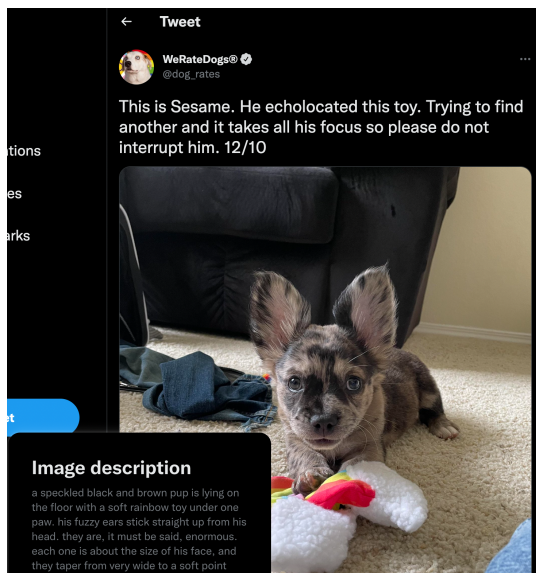


## Case Example: Good Alt Tag usage in social media posts

Images play a key role in how many people take in posts and content, but how does a person with a vision disability absorb the visual components of an image?

Often, screen readers or text-to-speech is used, so writing good alt tags that express what's vital about the image and how the image was designed to bolster the words that aren't part of an image.

*Example "Image Description" from a Twitter post.*



**Twitter image description/alt tag:** *"a speckled black and brown pup is lying on the floor with a soft rainbow toy under one paw. his fuzzy ears stick straight up from his head. they are, it must be said, enormous. each one is about the size of his face, and they taper from very wide to a soft point"*

**Is your organization building in the time for content contributors to write good alt text?**



### Use Case Example: NASA's Twitter

NASA's commitment to content accessibility in practice and delivery is evident in the July 2022 postings of images from the Webb telescope, as in the tweet to the left.

#### **Twitter image description/alt tag:**

*"The image is divided horizontally by an undulating line between a cloudscape forming a nebula along the bottom portion and a comparatively clear upper portion. Speckled across both portions is a starfield, showing*

*innumerable stars of many sizes. The smallest of these are small, distant, and faint points of light. The largest of these appear larger, closer, brighter, and more fully resolved with 8-point diffraction spikes. The upper portion of the image is blueish, and has wispy translucent cloud-like streaks rising from the nebula below. The orangish cloudy formation in the bottom half varies in density and ranges from translucent to opaque. The stars vary in color, the majority of which, have a blue or orange hue. The cloud-like structure of the nebula contains ridges, peaks, and valleys – an appearance very similar to a mountain range. Three long diffraction spikes from the top right edge of the image suggest the presence of a large star just out of view.”*

## What can you do in your organization?

You can't eliminate every risk and hurdle to accessibility, but you can actively and consistently minimize hurdles for folks with disabilities by instituting good practices.

Here's how:

1. Provide your team, leadership, and executives with the inclination to understand and practice accessibility.
2. Provide time for content producers to practice accessibility.
3. Encourage knowledge within your org and provide spaces to practice implementation and continue learning.
4. Use automation & tools to practice accessibility. Keep in mind that you cannot implement accessibility manually. Automated tools, tech, and software are your friends here.
5. Provide availability of expert resources for the constant motion and change at play. New smartphones come out every 12-18 months, how does your content fare on these new devices? Is your content inclusive?

## The most important barometer of accessibility in practice is executive sponsorship

Executive empathy builds to executive sponsorship – and both encourage good governance... **But how do you make the case to the c-level?**

Five benefits of accessibility in practice for the executive audience.

1. **Increased market share**— (did you know that people with disabilities have [over \\$500 billion](#) in disposable income? That's almost as much money as members of their community!)
2. **Extended reach to underserved audiences**
3. **Increased social justice alignment**— (becoming more accessible for underserved communities is the right thing to do, period.)



4. **Decreased operational costs**—(because everyone can leverage digital, and implementing accessibility makes this even easier.)
5. **Minimized risk**—lawsuits in this area are increasing each year. You can keep track of all related lawsuits [here](#) and download a 2021 year-end report on ADA accessibility lawsuits [here](#).

Lastly, a policy without accountability (at the leadership level) will not typically encourage change. Sustained progress comes with C-level understanding, empathy and backing. The most successful organizations we've seen generating truly equitable and inclusive content have leaders that actively push for and encourage accessibility.

## Begin your empathy change journey. Where can you start now?

Two simple but effective ways that organizations can train staff content contributors, and increase empathy and understanding for people with disabilities:

1. Short term: Demonstrate how someone with a disability might interact with your content or your engagement platforms. Try navigating your website without a mouse or a trackpad, using only a keyboard. Is it easy or difficult? How does a screen-reader work with the administrative interface of your email marketing platform or content management system?
2. Long-term: Build an Awareness Lab. Consider a virtual or physical "Accessibility Empathy Lab" A lab like this could help show the human side of working with technology tools. These labs could demonstrate to leaders that teams need increased accessibility to maintain momentum and productivity when faced with different ways of working.

## Establishing accessibility momentum in practice

Most of my vision has returned since my vision health scare. I no longer rely on all of these tools and shortcuts I learned, but the episode helped me gain more empathy and awareness of accessibility needs in systems and processes used to generate content. Think about how you can make content creation and content outreach easier for all. **Get started today!**

## Who is ParsonsTKO?

Collaboration, trust, and diversity of ideas are the foundational values that guide our company in helping mission-driven organizations. We believe these values, applied internally for our team and clients, will always result in right-fit solutions.

Our team is dedicated to helping you get the most out of your investments in data and technology by providing practical advice on process improvements, technology ownership, and data-driven analysis of success. We drive organizational alignment and accelerate progress towards your North Star goals.

Change is not comfortable but is inevitable. Innovation is not easy, but it is absolutely necessary. We pride ourselves on finding approaches that challenge the status quo, helping you overcome friction and inertia and become what you need to be to succeed.

## About the author



With a background in Art Education, Educational Technology, Information Technology and Digital Marketing, John has been designing, coordinating and launching websites and digital experiences since the turn of the century and joined ParsonsTKO in 2021.

At Enterprise Community Partners, a national, non-profit affordable housing organization, John helped design, build, launch, and maintain a modern marketing engagement architecture. This interconnected email, web, CRM and data ecosystem enabled Enterprise to quickly identify, grow and segment new audiences for affordable housing development, advocacy, social impact investment and philanthropy. John's past client work includes digital experiences for AARP, Audi USA, Abbott Pharmaceuticals, Wells Fargo Foundation, Windstream, Virginia Satellite Education Network and Enterprise Green Communities.

John received his B.S. at James Madison University and a leadership certificate at Loyola University. When he's not deeply engaged in customer journeys, writing user stories and prototyping wireframes, John enjoys logging the miles on his bike, hiking in the woods and perfecting vegetarian dishes in Richmond, VA, where he lives with his spouse Erica

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