



Building a Business Case for Digital Accessibility

July 2021

The legal, moral, and ethical imperative for digital accessibility is well-established, but Covid-19 is arguably the black swan event that clearly establishes it as a business imperative.

Digital accessibility is “one of the hottest topics in design,” argued Forrester Research in a Forbes blogⁱ. It claims that as much as \$16bn (£11.62bn) in design spend will shift to tech vendors and services companies that commit to accessibility (the US and Canada)ⁱⁱ.

During the past year, global movement, The Valuable 500ⁱⁱⁱ has signed up 500 CEOs from major companies who have committed to put disability on the leadership agenda.

Have we finally reached a tipping point where digital accessibility has equal status to securing your website?

In this briefing we ask accessibility leaders how they build the business case for accessibility. Interviewees included:

- AbilityNet Head of Digital Inclusion, Robin Christopherson, MBE,
- Accenture’s Laurie A. Henneborn,
- The Business Disability Forum’s Lucy Ruck,
- Caroline Casey, founder of The Valuable 500 and
- Christopher Patnoe, Google’s head of accessibility programs and disability inclusion

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1 The Business Case for accessibility

There's no doubt that Covid-19 accelerates the business case for accessibility.

Having almost everyone work from home during the pandemic highlighted the demand for accessible digital platforms. If nothing else it showed up the accessibility issues that may not have been seen before.

For example Caroline Casey, the founder of The Valuable 500, recalls having to ask colleagues in virtual meetings to stop using text chat because, as a blind woman, she can't read it.

Similarly, Covid-19 produced a seismic shift in shopping habits. Online supermarkets quickly ran out of slots. In March 2020, 40% of UK shoppers said they'd been shopping more online compared to pre-pandemic, according to Statista^{iv}.

By February 2021, 75 per cent of UK shoppers said they were shopping online more. Meanwhile, many high street shops disappeared.

1.1 Barriers to digital accessibility

Yet, many websites aren't accessible to disabled customers.

In 2016, the Click-Away Pound Survey found that 4 million people abandoned a retail website because of the barriers they encountered, taking with them an estimated spend of £11.75 billion. In 2019, it grew to £17.1 billion^v.

Despite these figures, accessibility is still not central to business strategies.

For example, a report by the International Labour Organization, "Leave No One Offline."^{vi} found that "very few C-Suites have made the connection that digital accessibility needs to be an integral part of the company's digital transformation strategy." However, they have accelerated digital transformation in the wake of Covid-19.

Robin Christopherson, AbilityNet's head of inclusion, fears that disability doesn't have the emotional pull for businesses that other areas of inclusion do.

He describes disability as "the poor cousin" of the diversity family. Global companies such as Microsoft, Apple, and Google have, says Christopherson, been "very vocal about accessibility". But, he adds, "we need to win the business case with our clients because they're not asking for us to develop accessible applications".

1.2 How do you build a business case for accessibility?

It's easy to dismiss big numbers on lost business – they can feel like someone else's problem. Lucy Ruck agrees that the numbers may not be as powerful as the personal experience of seeing someone struggle with one of your company's products.

"I can't remember what the figures are for the Purple Pound," She says. "There are so many different figures that I'm not always sure that it means as much as I met with Dave the other day and he's blind, and he can't use our software."

"Personal storytelling of someone you know, or someone you have a connection with, means so much more than a big figure that feels almost like it's too big for you to tap into," she adds.

1.3 Bringing accessibility into the boardroom

Bringing those stories into the boardroom will drive accessibility up the agenda.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2019, Caroline Casey announced her mission: to bring together 500 international organisations publicly committed to advancing disability inclusion within their business – The Valuable 500. It reached that target only 18 months later, bringing together the "world's biggest CEO collective for disability inclusion".

Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Nestle, Unilever, Shell, the BBC, and Vodafone are among a host of multinational giants that The Valuable 500 counts among its members.

The list also includes 36 FTSE 100 companies, 46 of the Fortune 500 and 28 of the Nikkei. The organisations have combined revenue of \$8 trillion and more than 20 million employees between them.

Casey believes the aggregate influence of those companies will start reshaping the disability landscape. "With the scale of The Valuable 500, change is possible because now we have the scale, the perfect time and the multiplier effect of this critical mass. It's all about intention," she said when the 500 target was reached in May.

1.4 The importance of lived experience

But speaking exclusively to AbilityNet, Casey admits there's still much work to do regarding inclusion amongst some of the world's biggest companies.

"Can you believe that in our FTSE 100 companies there is not one person in senior management level or above that openly identifies as having a disability?" she says.

"Now, we know that that cannot be true. We know that anything between 15 to 20% of our global population has some experience of disability. And we know that 80% of disabled people have invisible disabilities. And the piece of research that we did before we launched The Valuable 500 with EY said 7% of our C-suite [executives] have a lived experience. Yet, four out of five of them are not disclosing it, like I didn't 20 years ago."

Casey worked for Accenture and others and didn't disclose her visual impairment. She wants to see a lot more disabled people visible within senior leadership teams and in the boardrooms.

"If we do not have leaders at the top of their businesses, advocating and speaking to this as a strategic business imperative, it's not going to get done," she says.

Lucy Ruck, taskforce manager with the Business Disability Forum, agrees that disability still carries a stigma within business. "You might be female, you might be black, and you might have a disability, but the disability bit is always seen as the problem. We need to get over that."

2 The business benefits of a diverse workforce

It's proven that a diverse workforce can boost a company's bottom line.

Accenture's 2018 report "Getting to Equal; the Disability Inclusion Advantage."^{vii} looked at four years' worth of data from the Disability Equality Index (DEI). The DEI is a benchmarking tool to help companies work towards achieving disability inclusion and equality^{viii}.

The report identified 45 "best-in-class companies" that stood out regarding leadership areas specific to employment and inclusion.

These so-called "Champions" were, on average, twice as likely to outperform their peers in terms of total shareholder returns compared with the rest of the sample. Companies that improved their score "improvers" are four times as likely to have total shareholder returns that outperform their peers compared to non-improvers.

The report also found that champions achieved 28% higher revenue and a 30% better performance on economic profit margin.

One reason for the profit boost is that a diverse workforce helps to win the business case internally. "Having someone with impairment [within your organisation], it is an additional reminder that this is a community that we're building for," said Christopher Patnoe, Google's head of accessibility programs and disability inclusion.

3 Brand narrative: the role of disability and accessibility within ESG

3.1 What does ESG stand for?

ESG stands for Environmental, Social and Governance standards. Seen as something of a successor to CSR (corporate and social responsibility), ESG is not just about having statements of intent and company policies. It's about having measurable business objectives.

Such benchmarking of performance is essential for modern businesses, especially those with shareholders. With investors increasingly motivated by a company's sustainability and societal impact, it's vital to show how the company reaches its ESG targets.

ESG benchmarks might include the following:

- Environmental - how a company addresses climate change on factors such as energy consumption, recycling rates, use of rare-earth materials, greenhouse emission standards and more.
- Social – the business's record on diversity and inclusion, pay equality, social justice, data privacy, health and safety and other factors.
- Governance - how the company manages itself when it comes to factors such as executive pay, diversity of the board of directors, transparency in communication with shareholders and other factors that deal with how the company is run

The matters we're discussing here straddle both Social and Governance. Indeed, several experts believe it's the Governance issue that large corporations need to address urgently, with more senior leadership roles for people with disabilities.

The Business Disability Forum's Lucy Ruck cites Accenture research. It found that employees with disabilities are 27% less likely to feel included in the workplace and 60% more likely to feel excluded.

She adds, "Seventy-one per cent said that seeing people like me in a senior leadership is an important factor," she adds.

"We need to get over ourselves with this stuff – it's just a disability. If we're not careful, we'll continue that cycle."

3.2 Companies that focus on ESG win more customers

The Disability Equality Index (DEI) reflects the growing focus on ESG (Economic, Social and Governance) among business, markets, and consumers.

Companies that focus on ESG responsibilities are more likely to win customers – particularly in the financial sector. For example, 87% of millennials indicated the importance of ESG in investment decisions.

Increasingly, all consumers want to spend with companies who care. In 20 years, ethical consumerism has grown three-fold from £11.2bn to £41.1bn in the UK^{ix}. A 2005 study examining consumer attitudes towards companies that hire people with disabilities found that 92% of consumers felt more favourable toward companies that hire individuals with disabilities^x.

3.3 Addressing the disability gap

Accenture found that persons with disabilities represent about 15% of the world's population but are enormously under-represented in the global workforce, with 80% estimated to be unemployed.

While CEOs and senior leaders are embracing inclusion, they are “not connecting the dots that a digital accessibility investment has a universally positive impact on all users, internal and external, and is a pre-requisite for sustainable and scalable hiring in serving people with all different abilities,” says the report from the International Labour Organization^{xi}.

It also found that most companies do not appear to have a critical mass of in-house expertise or an excellent curriculum to educate employees at large about digital accessibility.

With more people likely to be working from home for the foreseeable future and more people likely to suffer from a long-term disability as a direct effect of Covid, we need to find solutions.

“We're not going to get a perfect solution for everyone,” says Casey, “but we need to be intentional in how we can have the best solution for the most [people].”

4 Business as usual for digital accessibility

4.1 Tech companies in the lead

Major technology companies are leading the charge in embedded digital accessibility.

"Now we're in this really interesting place where the Googles, the Apples and the Microsofts are competing on accessibility," said Google's Patnoe. "It is a business advantage to have a good story. It has a halo effect in terms of your brand."

He recalls when Microsoft released an adaptive controller for the Xbox console and then put a commercial for it in the middle of the Super Bowl, the most-watched sports event in the US^{xii}.

That says Patnoe, "raised the visibility of accessibility from a major corporation, from being something you do to feel good, to something that you can compete on."

4.2 Accessibility built-in to standard software and hardware

Microsoft made a raft of announcements at its 2021 Ability Summit, including deciding to turn on its accessibility checker in Microsoft Word by default.

The checker sits beside the spell-checker within the Word Ribbon. The software giant hopes the accessibility checker will become as ubiquitous as its neighbour. Microsoft is also bringing Immersive Reader to PowerPoint. Both are a step forward for making documents more accessible in the workplace.

Apple also made a raft of announcements in 2021's worldwide developer conference^{xiii}.

They included bringing Assistive Touch to the Apple Watch, a more descriptive version of VoiceOver – the screen reader for iOS – VoiceOver will read out descriptions relating to images. It also included the introduction of background sounds for people with neurodiverse needs.

4.3 Developing a future business case

Both announcements are significant. Microsoft is bringing accessibility features out from 'under the hood' and positioning them as a mainstream feature – one that can benefit not just disabled people but every office worker.

In making its announcements at its developer conference, Apple underlines that while tech companies are building the capability, it is for others to take advantage of these features.

Notably, VoiceOver in iOS15 will only be able to read out audio descriptions of images if the people building those web pages and apps add the alternative text descriptions that enable this.

Those who do not "plug into" new features are increasingly likely to be caught out, risking customers clicking away from their websites and services and turning to providers who do. The Click-Away Pound^{xiv} found that 63% of people are using Assistive Technology – up from 53% in 2016. The survey also saw an increase in those using screen readers (58%), magnification (27%) and speech recognition (23%).

4.4 A successful business strategy

Accenture's research quantifies the business benefits of accessibility. Still, it can be challenging for individual companies to monitor spend and return on investment.

Many companies, Patnoe argues, fall into the trap of treating accessibility as a tick box exercise, something they tag on at the end of the product development cycle to meet compliance. This makes accessibility “harder and more expensive,” he says.

On the other hand, if accessibility is part of the company's culture and budgeted for at the beginning of a product lifecycle, “then it just happens”.

Numerous accessibility benchmarks enable businesses to measure progress.

Robin Christopherson points to AbilityNet's own Digital Accessibility Maturity Model, which provides a matrix on which companies can assess their level of accessibility support.

It explores key areas or pillars that can drive the accessibility agenda:

- Vision,
- Leadership,
- Processes,
- Capability and
- Procurement.

Each area is scored from 1 (outmoded practice, minimal effort) to 5 (leading-edge excellence). "It's an eye-opening exercise for companies," he says.

Similarly, the Business Disability Forum has identified five areas that can drive the business case for accessibility: Innovation, Inclusion, Brand, Productivity and Compliance.

4.5 A benchmark for business excellence

The Disability Equality Index helps companies build a roadmap of measurable, tangible actions that they can take to achieve disability inclusion and equality.

Casey believes that coalescing around a single standard for measuring accessibility and inclusion would be a positive step forward.

"There are lots of great consultants, there are lots of great benchmarks, there are lots of good standards, but we don't have one universal standard. So I think that is something that we are going to need to start working towards," she says.

"The reason those badges are important is so that people can differentiate themselves, to stand out amongst the masses. Awards exist in everything we do. Badges exist in everything we do. The whole point is to recognise somebody doing something brilliant."

Do you know how you measure up?

How AbilityNet can help

AbilityNet has a [range of accessibility products and services](#), which can support you on your accessibility journey.

- Download our [catalogue](#) including an A-Z of services
- [Ask for help from our experts](#)
- Digital Accessibility Services team +44 (0)1926 465 247
- Email us: sales@abilitynet.org.uk
- Do you know how to promote diversity and inclusion? We can show you [how to build an inclusive workplace](#) to enable your employees to perform at their best.

5 Meet the experts



Robin Christopherson (MBE) AbilityNet's Head of Digital Inclusion

Robin, who is blind, uses speech output to access computers, the internet, his iPhone, and other assistive technologies. He knows first-hand the frustrations that can occur when websites aren't accessible and usable with assistive technology – such as his screen reading software. Robin has courtroom experience as an expert technical witness in assistive technology and software, systems, and website accessibility.



Lucy Ruck, Leader of the Technology Taskforce for the Business Disability Forum.

[Lucy](#) is an accessibility evangelist and an experienced speaker, [including at AbilityNet's TechShare Pro](#). In addition, she leads the BDF's Technology Taskforce, which includes developing the taskforce's toolkit of information.



Christopher Patnoe is Google's head of Accessibility Programs and Disability Inclusion.

He is a regular speaker at TechShare Pro and other accessibility conferences and is passionate about the diversity and inclusion agenda.



Laurie A. Henneborn is a managing director within

Accenture's Research organisation and has 25+ years of research and leadership experience. Laurie is the executive sponsor for research and TL initiatives on Accenture's Global Disability Inclusion Advisory Council and co-executive sponsor for the Metro NY Disability Employee Resource Group. In addition, she serves on the Board of Directors for the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD).



Caroline Casey, Founder of the Valuable 500

Caroline Casey is an award-winning social entrepreneur who is committed to building a global movement on inclusive business for the 1.3 billion people in the world with a disability. Her latest initiative, The Valuable 500, is an ambitious year-long campaign to get 500 businesses to commit to put disability inclusion on their leadership agendas.

References

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