

Are we creating buildings without access ramps?

By [Germari Steenkamp](#)

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Digital has long been built with the “perfect” human in mind. These users have 20/20 vision and read with high literacy. The experiences digital enables are geared for an able-bodied person with two hands, two working legs and perfect hearing. But let's think about it, amongst your loved ones, how many wear spectacles? Or have a learning disability? We are failing our South African audiences with the work we create.



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In a Rhodes [study](#) of 70 South African business websites, only 4.3% complied with the minimum standards from the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines of the World Wide Web Consortium. Census 2011 data indicates that most people living with disabilities in South Africa struggle with their vision. A total of 2.8-million South Africans are living with a disability, ranging from sight issues, loss of hearing, memory loss, difficulties in communication, self-care or walking. Disabled People of South Africa (DPSA) figures indicate a prevalence of disability amongst our population of 14%.

At first, one might come up with a few excuses for neglecting this step of the process – the web isn't as real as the physical world, after all! Or perhaps, much like the “Terms and Conditions” or legal links, web accessibility is the last item on the list when creating a website or digital product. It's becoming the neglected stepchild of digital content creation.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) defines web accessibility as the ability for people with disabilities to “perceive, understand, navigate and interact with the web”. And whilst we like to think our digital experiences and content is easy to digest, unfortunately, we are still falling short when it comes to our disabled audiences, as we are still not designing with them in mind (let's be honest).

A case of global exclusion

Some extreme parallels can be drawn in the physical world of accessibility in recent days. On 28 June 2017, Uber came

under fire again for denying equal access to people who use wheelchairs, [facing another legal battle with the Equal Rights Centre](#). “Were they accessible to wheelchair users, Uber’s transportation services could have life-changing effects for wheelchair users, improving their ability to work, study, participate in community life, and generally to live more independently,” the lawsuit claims.

This seems like quite a faux pas on Uber’s part. Surely they should have considered the mobility impaired audience as a niche market they could tap into massively, other than the obvious social impact? Who needs Uber more than individuals who struggle with public transport or who can’t attain their own transport? It boils down to who Uber was designed for, to begin with, and unfortunately, theirs was not an inclusive business model. Reverse-engineering accessibility is not the easiest thing to do.

In contrast, we have seen the recent launch of a fully accessible water park. “Morgan’s Inspiration Island” in San Antonio, Texas, is the [first of its kind](#). It’s based on a promise of giving all individuals a place to splash and play without barriers – and it’s positioned as an inclusive park, not a special needs park.

South African digital experiences lagging

While the rest of the world is making leaps in accessibility, SA is falling behind. There isn’t specific web accessibility legislation in place in South Africa, something you find to be common practice in the UK and other more developed countries. And so, if we are not held legally accountable for the limited access to our sites, do we keep building beautiful award-winning work that is not screen-reader friendly?

The truth of the matter is that as digital creatives and professionals, we are responsible and accountable for how we present our work, and to whom we make it accessible. Websites and digital experiences that are not designed accessibly actively exclude the people who need the internet most: those with limited mobility, who strive for independence and a connection to the rest of the world.

How to include disabled audiences

It’s easy to get started. Firstly, understand that impairment does not only cater for the “obviously” impaired. For example, dyslexic and autistic users struggle too, as indicated with these amazing posters created by [Karwai Pun](#). For cognitive impairments like these, the best thing you can do is to simplify your content and designs. The more moving parts and fancy visuals (like the beloved image carousel we see on most websites), the harder it is for these users to focus.

For visual accessibility, be mindful that your audience uses screen readers, screen magnifiers and colour contrast tools. When creating digital content, the structure makes a massive difference. Use logical heading structures, meaningful alt text and label links properly. When designing for digital, high colour contrast is vital. A contrast ratio of 4:5:1 is required to pass minimum standards (AA) for text and images of text. If you are not sure how to check these ratios on your designs, various online tools exist, like the [webaim contrast checker](#). And please do not rely on colour alone to convey meaning – consider those who are colour blind.

Users with motor disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, have limited range of motion and control. Ensure keyboard shortcuts are in place for every clickable element, and that links are clear and easy to hit. Also consider voice navigation, as some users would have assistive technologies plugged into their devices such as voice recognition. This means you can't hide functions behind hover states – if a user can't see a function, they can't call it up with voice command.

There are various online resources that provide guidelines and assistance in creating accessible web experiences. Clear patterns exist for how to build accessible versions of menus, modals etc., and following those rules are a great start. Your user journeys should include impaired users in addition to the usual personae that you target. This is a big ask, I know, and quite difficult for us to apply when we have timelines and budgets to consider. But if you need to validate the extra effort, look to the testimonials of those users who struggle every day. Safia Abdalla asked people to share their struggles via Twitter, and the [response was eye-opening](#). It's also highly recommended that you also include users with impairments in your test groups.

At the very least, awareness helps. Now you know that, even more so in the world of accessibility, you are not the user. Don't design for your peers, design for the people out there who have to use your experience.

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