

How to Implement a Website Accessibility Program



Ensuring your company website is accessible has become not only a legal but business imperative.

The duty under human rights laws to make reasonable accommodations for disabled job applicants and employees kicks in only when somebody actually requests an accommodation. Several jurisdictions consider this approach to be too passive and have adopted laws requiring employers to take proactive measures to make their workplaces and businesses accessible to the disabled. These laws look beyond a single employee and consider accessibility to all disabled persons across a broad range of public activities. One crucial aspect of accessibility is with regard to a company's website. Here's a briefing on current [website accessibility legal requirements](#) across Canada and what you must do [to comply with them](#).

Why Website Accessibility Is an Issue

A company's website and web content contain key information about its operations, products and job opportunities. The problem is that this material may be inaccessible to people with different kinds of disabilities. Examples of website accessibility barriers:

- Poor colour contrast or use of colour alone to provide information may be inaccessible to individuals who are colour blind or have limited vision;
- Lack of text alternatives ("alt text") on images, charts, pictures and illustrations renders them inaccessible to the blind and visually impaired;
- Lack of captions on videos renders them inaccessible to the deaf and hearing impaired;
- Those with disabilities may be unable to fill out, understand and accurately fill out forms without certain forms of assistance;
- Mouse-only navigation makes content inaccessible to persons who can't use a mouse and rely on keyboard navigation.

ACCESSIBILITY LAWS ACROSS CANADA

No Accessibility Laws	Accessibility Required for Public Sector Only	Accessibility Required for Public and Private Sectors
Alberta, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon	Nova Scotia, Quebec	Federal, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario

Website Accessibility Legal Requirements

Accessibility is about actively breaking down barriers that keep disabled people from enjoying the same opportunities as other job applicants, employees and customers. That includes barriers to websites and digital content. Accessibility laws vary widely. [Ontario](#), [Manitoba](#) and the [federal jurisdiction](#) have the strictest requirements. [BC](#) and Newfoundland have adopted legislation allowing the government to mandate website accessibility but haven't yet issued regulations implementing those requirements. Saskatchewan and New Brunswick are considering adopting their own accessibility laws.

Business Advantages of Making Your Website Accessible

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In addition to avoiding costly fines and penalties for violating the accessibility laws of your province, ensuring that your company's website is accessible to persons with disabilities can significantly help your business by:

- **Increasing website traffic** since more people will be able to access your site;
- **Gaining new customers** because increased access will likely result in increased conversions;
- **Better search engine optimization** (SEO) and search engine results pages (SERP) rankings since your content will become not only more reachable but also relevant, concise and simpler to use; and
- **Faster page loading speed and improved website user experience**, which are the typical results of making a website accessible.

WCAG 2.0, Level AA Compliance & the POUR Principles

Where website accessibility is legally required, it means complying with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, a set of standards created by an international organization called the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). WCAG 2.0 is actually made up of different guidelines, each of which has 3 levels of accessibility, starting with A and progressing in stringency to AA and AAA. Accessibility laws require compliance at level AA. To be considered accessible under WCAG standards, web content must meet the principles of POUR:

P-Perceivable

Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive. In simple terms, users must be able to perceive the information presented and it can't be invisible to **all** of their senses. **Compliance strategy:**

- Provide text alternatives for non-text content;

- Provide captions and other alternatives for multimedia;
- Create content that can be presented in different ways, including by assistive technologies, without losing meaning;
- Make it easier for users to see and hear content.

O-Operable

Users must be able to operate user interface components and navigation. In other words, the interface and navigation can't rely on interactions that a user can't perform, such as mouse-only navigation that a person without the required motor skills or appendages can't use. **Compliance strategy:**

- Make all functionality available from a keyboard;
- Give users enough time to read and use content;
- Don't use content that causes seizures;
- Help users navigate and find content.

U-Understandable

Users must be able to understand both the information and user interface operation. **Compliance strategy:**

- Make text readable and understandable;
- Ensure content appears and operates in predictable ways;
- Help users avoid and correct mistakes.

R-Robust

Robust means that content can be accessed, read and interpreted reliably by users with assistive technologies such as voice scanners or other agents. **Compliance strategy:**

- Maximize compatibility with current and future user tools;
- Ensure content remains accessible as technologies and user agents advance.

Practical Strategy to Make Your Website Accessible

Website accessibility may be all well and good. But how do you get there from where you are now? The starting point is to [audit](#) your current website for accessibility. Government guidelines from Ontario (the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) requires private sector employers with 50 or more employees to meet [website accessibility requirements](#), including compliance with WCAG 2.0, level AA) list 4 things companies can do to determine if their new or refreshed website is accessible:

1. Use Automatic Assessment and Assistive Technology

Do a final evaluation of your site using an automatic assessment to flag any issues that may not have been resolved. For example, you can review your site using assistive technology such as a screen reader to make sure the design and technical aspects of the site are accessible.

2. Perform User Testing

If possible, ask people with disabilities to test your new or refreshed site before you launch. Get feedback from customers and other site users to find out if you need any improvements.

3. Review Key Milestones and Changes

Keep a record of the accessibility issues that have been repaired, or ask your web developer to maintain such a record. This will show you the completed work and the new level of accessibility. It will also be helpful if your organization is asked to show that your website is WCAG 2.0 compliant.

4. Use Online Accessibility Checker

You can use an online tool to check if your website is accessible. Using an online accessibility checker doesn't guarantee that you'll detect all accessibility issues with your website. So, it's also important to have an actual person review the site.

Key Indicators of Compliance

To [ensure that your company website complies](#) with WCAG 2.0, verify that:

- All images, media files and maps have an "ALT" tag;
- All online forms have descriptive HTML tags;
- The entire website is accessible with keyboard navigation;
- All hyperlinks have a descriptive anchor text;
- All website pages have "skip navigation" links;
- All text content is structured using proper heading tags;
- PDFs are used sparingly and made accessible where they are used;
- All videos have captions, subtitles, transcripts and audio description;
- Colour-contrast ratio between text and background is at least 4.5:1;
- All fonts are accessible;
- All HTML tables are populated with column headers, row identifiers and cell information;
- All audio files have written captions;
- All forms are accessible via use of methods such as labeling and grouping controls, error messages, input validation and avoidance of time limits;
- All call-to-action buttons have an accessible name and Accessible Rich Internet Applications (ARIA) label;
- Every page has a language attribute tag to enable translation of content via assistive technology;
- The website has a website accessibility policy page;
- The website has easily locatable contact information enabling users to request accessibility information;
- Moving, flickering or flashing colours, images, text or other content on a screen that can cause dizziness, nausea or distraction are avoided wherever possible.