

Efforts under way to make Web more accessible

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In his Nov. 23, 2009 photo, Victor Tsaran, co-director of Yahoo's "Accessibility Lab", uses a Braille keyboard in his lab at Yahoo Inc. headquarters in Sunnyvale, Calif. In the "Accessibility Lab" it allows programmers and developers to try various assistive technology software and hardware such as screen readers, Braille keyboards, a head mouse, joy sticks, trackballs and other tools employed by disabled users to navigate the Web. "Our goal is to make people feel more at ease with disabilities," explains Tsaran, who is blind. "And our task is to make technology work for people. Accessibility is a big big big big part of that." (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma)

(AP) -- Imagine not being able to use a mouse to open a Web browser or a keyboard to type an e-mail. What if you couldn't distinguish colors on a computer screen or type the distorted letters in order to buy concert tickets or enroll in a class?

Despite technological advances aimed at making the Internet easy to use,

the [World Wide Web](#) is not wide open for many people.

But as the number of people with disabilities grows and more of everything is done online, companies are finding it makes good business sense to make their sites more accessible and are hiring consultants and training programmers to make it happen.

"Web sites are nowadays the virtual front door of a business. If you can't get in, you can't get your business done and they just lost a customer," said Dmitri Belser, the executive director of the Center for Accessible Technology in Berkeley, which has worked with Intel Corp., Gap Inc. and others.

There are more than 50 million people in the U.S. with disabilities, including blindness, hearing-impairments, mobility difficulties and cognitive and [neurological problems](#).

The World Wide Web Consortium, which develops standards for the Web, has issued guidelines for designers to help them create more accessible sites. They include providing text labels for images, captions on audio and video and making [keyboard](#) shortcuts for people who can't use a mouse.

"When the Web is designed well, it is so enabling. It allows people to contribute on an equal plane," said Shawn Lawton Henry, outreach coordinator at the consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative.

While most federal government Web sites are required by law to be accessible, companies have no legal obligation to incorporate the features.

But Jim Thatcher, who developed the IBM screen reader, which blind people use to read the Internet, said the threat of civil rights lawsuits has

motivated some companies.

Last year, Target Corp. agreed to pay \$6 million in damages to plaintiffs in a California class action lawsuit who were unable to use its Web site. Thatcher, who was an expert witness during the trial, said there were many links on Target's site that were unintelligible to screen-reading software. He said there have been improvements since the settlement with the National Federation of the Blind.

Apple Inc. also reached an agreement with the state of Massachusetts to alter the program iTunes to make it accessible to the blind.

"No question that companies are seeking more help since those cases," said Thatcher, who is working with Amazon.com on its site.

Apple's iPhone has been praised for its accessibility features, including screen reader audio that comes standard on the machine.

Knowing how disabled people use the Web is the first step to making the Web accessible, experts say.

At Yahoo Inc. headquarters in Silicon Valley, an "Accessibility Lab" allows programmers and developers to try various assistive technology software and hardware.

The lab's directors, Victor Tsaran and Alan Brightman, show visitors how screen reader software works, and make them try Braille keyboards, a head-controlled mouse, joy sticks, trackballs and other tools employed by disabled users to navigate the Web.

"Our goal is to make people feel more at ease with disabilities," explains Tsaran, who is blind. "And our task is to make technology work for people. Accessibility is a big, big, big, big part of that."

The lab, which opened almost two years ago, is available to Yahoo employees as well as developers from other companies.

"Our feeling is everything should be as accessible as possible," Brightman said. "Let's not compete over whether a disabled person can use your site."

Guy Thomas, of San Leandro, who has little arm movement because of a neuromuscular disability, plays a lot of games on the Internet, using a trackball and mouse stick. He said there are some games that have made adaptations for otherwise challenging moves, such as hitting one key while holding down another. Those improvements, he said, are essential to letting him enjoy the new games on the Web.

"When you're playing a game, it's one of the few places you don't have to be disabled. You're just a guy, playing a game," he said. "But if you run into an obstacle, it's the same as if I was on a basketball court unable to throw a ball to the hoop."

Experts say accessibility features make a better Internet for all.

For example, the ability to zoom in on a map or magnify font was conceived for people with low vision but it's helpful for anyone.

"It's like sidewalks. You build a wheelchair ramp and not only is it a better sidewalk for those users, but for strollers, luggage, delivery people," Brightman said.

Yahoo recently made upgrades to its home page to add labels that make it easier for people using screen readers to jump around the page. The Internet company also has added audio CAPTCHA image verifications for users who can neither see nor comprehend the distorted words.

Google Inc., whose programmers have used the Yahoo lab, recently introduced automatic machine-generated captions for videos on its YouTube site to make them accessible to the deaf and hearing-impaired.

"It's all about being aware," said Henry of the Web consortium. "Often if you don't know anyone with a disability, you don't think about it."

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