

Accessibility Laws Overview

Introduction

This is an overview of the significant laws governing accessibility in the United States of America and a Microsoft Word document example formatted with accessibility features. The objective is to briefly describe important laws and regulations that have paved the way in recognizing accessibility as a human right, which include the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

History

Following World War I and World War II, the issue of disability became more prominent in our society, where local and state leaders and parents continued to advocate for their children with disabilities for equal access in society, housing, transportation, and education. The list below presents by date some of the major laws and guidelines passed by congress and by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).

1. 1973 - the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
2. 1975 - the Education for All Handicapped Children Act
3. 1990 - the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
4. 1999 - the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 1.0
5. 2008 - the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0
6. 2018 - the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1

These dates remind us that inclusion and accessibility are a work in progress that has improved over the years. It requires everyone's participation, and the latest guidelines apply to digital content distributed over web pages.

Impact on Society

I believe a major piece of legislation to address equality for persons with disabilities was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This law paved the way for future reforms and established that accessibility is a human right where people with disabilities are protected by law. Following this law, in 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed and later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. For instructional designers and educators, the IDEA should be something like a theme song that reminds and helps us ensure our instructional materials are inclusive by integrating accessibility features such as in this Word document.

Another critical piece of legislation was the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed in 1990. This legislation not only consolidated past laws into one, but it also expanded equal access and protection in areas such as transportation. When this legislation passed, according to the Anti-Defamation League in an article published at [ADL Education](#), the government in the United States of America “identified the full participation, inclusion and integration of people with disabilities in all levels of society.” This is a significant accomplishment, and most of us daily can be grateful that our friends and family members, even with a disability, are active and contributing members of our communities.

Moreover, digital content published on the Web must be inclusive by ensuring accessibility features are embedded in the material developed. This is possible by the guidelines set by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) in their published Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), which has now undergone two updates. In 1999, the first version of WCAG 1.0 was released.

These guidelines further accentuated to web developers the need to separate content from presentation by using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), where the result was more control of the presentation and easier to add accessibility features. One example is using font styles. In 2008, WCAG 2.0 was introduced. A major change was the introduction of four principles, which are described below in the following table.

Principle	Description
Perceivable	Information and the user interface must be presentable.
Operable	Navigation and user interface must be operable.
Understandable	Users must be able to understand the content and navigation.
Robust	The content must be readable to human users and assistive technologies.

In 2018, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 was introduced. It is important to note that all three versions supplement each other, and previous versions are not deprecated. Additional success criteria were added to address a broader range of disabilities, including, as a side effect, those due to aging, like loss of hearing and vision. To illustrate, one of the additional success criteria included is the content on hover or focus. That is, a mouse pointer hovering can trigger additional information. This additional information is tooltips created by the developer using the HTML title attribute.

Conclusion

Accessibility has come a long way, and it is worth improving and adjusting to the new challenges that come our way. Technology provides us with innovations but, at the same time, challenges to make sure information is available to everyone regardless of the disability one may have. Our goal should be to enable us all to live to the maximum in all areas of life; previous legislation passed proves it is possible.

Reference

A Brief History of the Disability Rights Movement. ADL Education. (2022).

<https://www.adl.org/resources/backgroundunder/brief-history-disability-rights-movement>