

CASE STUDY: Arts For All

Kylee Maloney, a consultant on accessible documentation

June 2012

"My vision statement on my website is that one day I hope to be redundant – that accessible documents and websites will be the norm and I won't be needed." Kylee Maloney, a specialist in accessible documentation, talks to Arts Access Aotearoa.

1. Background: about me

I suppose you could call me an access activist. Actually, I feel strongly about human rights issues, and access both to the built environment and to information is now enshrined in international law. Although there was some media attention when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was signed in 2005, I was one of the very few members of the media who covered it during the process of its negotiation.

The law aside, however, many people don't think much about human rights – mainly because they think it doesn't affect them. I realised pretty quickly that trying to promote access on that basis would only take me so far.

That's why I run Silver Cords, an accessible documentation consultancy. Silver Cords will consult with you and show you how to create documents that are accessible. And we won't hit you over the head in the process.

There are many reasons why an accessible document is better for organisations. It's more productive, sustainable and usable than a non-accessible one, so there's no need to play the disability card very strongly. After all, getting the message across is most important.

For the record, I also contract as an information architect and content writer to Lonsdale Media, a web development company in Australia specialising in accessible websites.

2. What does accessible documentation mean?

Accessible documentation means a document that everyone can read and use with equal efficiency. If a disabled person takes significantly longer than her non-disabled peer to use the same document, this means there is a design flaw in the document – not in the disabled person. Through the principle of universal design, documents can be authored to suit most needs.



Arts For All is an Arts Access Aotearoa/Creative New Zealand partnership programme. The aim of this programme is to encourage arts organisations, venues and producers to improve their access to disabled audiences. Download *Arts For All*, published in 2014 by Arts Access Aotearoa, at artsaccess.org.nz or call 04 802 4349 for a hard copy.



An accessible document is one that can be converted into multiple formats without too much additional work. Since Microsoft Word is still a very popular method of authoring documents, this is what I use.

In practice, this means using the correct MS Word style or function for the correct task: in other words, using a heading style to indicate a heading and a list style to indicate a list. Often, authors indicate style changes by manually changing the font style or colour. However, the computer does not recognise those changes, even though they may be visually satisfying. This means that these elements will not be recognised when they are converted to another format (e.g. a pdf document), making the conversion task time-consuming and difficult.

In terms of accessible documentation for Deaf people or people with learning difficulties, a visual representation is very useful. That means a completely different format may be needed.

However, some people from both communities may be able to access a classically authored document provided you keep your content simple and straightforward, without dumbing it down.

Universal design isn't about pleasing absolutely everyone, as this simply isn't possible. A well-designed, accessible building will always throw up a curve ball for someone – something that is hard to avoid. In the same way, an accessible document will suit the needs of most people – but not all. As long as those who access the document can use it reasonably easily, they're more empowered than they were if the document was inaccessible.

Accessibility is about choice, after all, and choice is power. For organisations, the principle of universal design is much easier to take than the thought of having to provide heaps of different formats for people's differing needs.

3. Arts organisations tend to be under-resourced in terms of time and money. Creating accessible documents might seem like just another thing they have to do. What's your response to this?

Accessible documentation speaks both to sustainability and productivity. Think about what you can do with a document that only has superficial formatting: i.e. the formatting is visual rather than technical. Your options are either to store or print, the latter being increasingly seen as wasteful.

An accessible source document can be converted into many different formats such as HTML, accessible PDF, DAISY or braille with little additional work. Such a document is ready-made for today's increasingly convergent environment where multiple formats may be required. Additionally, use of keyboard shortcuts rather than the mouse adds even more speed to the process.

When I trained as a typist, I was taught to add style manually. But doing that on a computer just makes for more work in the end, especially when you try to convert all that hard work into an alternative format.

4. What technologies do blind and vision impaired people use to read documents?

For people with vision impairments, there are basically three options: screen magnification, screen reader and refreshable braille. For people who are deaf-blind, braille is the only real option.

I use a screen reader and/or a refreshable braille display. The screen reader takes the information on the screen, re-arranges it as necessary and presents it as electronic speech. This works well until it encounters information it can't interpret (e.g. images without alternative text) or non-standard code that it can't recognise (e.g. unformatted heading styles).

The braille display is an expensive but increasingly important tool for people who can't read print because it presents the information in braille on a one-line display. While a screen reader can read information clearly, it's not always possible to hear the difference between words. For instance, the words "peace" and "piece" sound the same. The only way to know which word is correct in context is to either see it with your eyes or touch it with the fingers. Therefore, the screen reader and braille display often work well together for someone like me.

However, magnification and the screen reader are often used together by people with some vision. Using both is more efficient for them because there's only so far you can magnify something before it loses its perspective.

5. What do blind and vision impaired people require for documents and websites to be accessible for them?

I don't like to think of accessibility in terms of disability requirements but as best practice in design. An accessible document will meet these requirements because I can use it as efficiently as my peers.

Although it's possible to talk of accessibility in terms of individual impairment, there are inherent dangers in doing so. Firstly, focusing on the needs of a particular impairment group will not make a document accessible to all. And secondly, the "special needs" tag is still too easy to dismiss if authors do not consider disabled people as part of their audience.

6. What are five simple things organisations can do to make their documents and websites more accessible?

- Always use the right tool for the right job. Tables should be reserved for tabular data and not used to make headings more visually appealing.
- Larger fonts and high colour contrast means clearer reading for most people, whether they're disabled or not. IF you do nothing else, this will be a beginning.
- Learn how to use the heading styles to structure your document logically. If you don't find the default styles to your liking, you can create a template that suits your visual taste or the house style of your organisation.
- Alternative text (i.e. alt tags) not only helps describe text to users of screen reading software, it helps your favourite search engine find your work.
- Make judicious use of bookmarks and hyperlinks to aid navigation and increase that all-important search ranking.

7. In five years time, how do you think New Zealand will have advanced in its provision of accessible documentation?

I think the demand for accessible documentation is growing, particularly within government organisations. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will also start to have some effect. I'd like to think that in five years time, the number of accessible documents will have increased. If I can help to make this happen, one organisation or even one document at a time, I'll have done my bit.