

Book Review

J. Lazar, D.F. Goldstein, and A. Taylor,
Ensuring Digital Accessibility through Process and Policy,
Morgan Kaufmann (2015)

T.H. Tse
Department of Computer Science
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam, Hong Kong

This is an excellent work by two IT experts and one legal expert. The book provides comprehensive details of digital accessibility including the history of access technology in chapter 2, the present technical standards in chapter 4, the US laws in chapter 5, the international laws in chapter 6, the general regulations in chapter 7, the evaluation methods in chapter 8, the compliance monitoring policies in chapter 9, and success stories in chapter 10.

Of particular conceptual interest to general readers are chapter 1 that introduces the concepts of digital accessibility, chapter 3 that highlights the discriminatory effects of digital inaccessibility, and chapter 11 that identifies recent cultural changes. For example, chapter 1 stresses the usefulness of universally accessible solutions to people with or without disabilities while chapter 3 rightly criticizes the “separate but equal” solutions. Furthermore, chapter 11 is a must-read for everybody. It covers the cultural meaning of disability, addresses the misconceptions of disability as a tragedy and disability as a trait to be dealt with, and proposes new concepts in organizational policies and market demands. Even though I have decades of experience in accessibility design for the physical and virtual environments, I still found quite a number of eye-openers in this awesome chapter.

Even though this is not a book on implementation techniques, the authors might consider providing some technical hints for web accessibility in a future edition, in order to provide advice to webmasters. For example, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 recommend “text alternatives for any non-text content.” However, novices may misinterpret this as providing “separate but unequal” plain-text web pages to people with a disability. The book rightly clarifies that “images, interactive graphics, links, form fields, etc, must have a label or descriptions as appropriate.” It would help web developers if the authors would have further elaborated that we can easily achieve this by using the ALT attribute in HTML IMG tags, as recommended by the W3C Quality Assurance Tips for Webmasters. The creation of searchable PDF files using “Save as” in Microsoft Word may also be highlighted. These simple technical instructions are much more useful than the dry administrative procedures described in the book, such as the preparation of a working draft, followed by a last call working draft, followed by a candidate recommendation, and so on.

To motivate vendors to adopt digital accessibility, the enactment of laws may not necessarily be the best option. Market demand would be instrumental as correctly pointed out in the book. Unfortunately, the number of disabled customers will not surge overnight. In addition, we may consider promoting the market needs of universally accessible software for people with or without a disability. Young upwardly mobile professionals, for instance, rely on smartphones and tablets for Internet access. They may turn off the automatic image loading facility in their devices in order to avoid unwarranted charges in cellular data or to prevent phishing. Thus, web pages and email messages with text alternatives will not only appeal to people with disabilities, but also to a wider market.

In conclusion, this is an outstanding book for readers who are interested in the fundamentals of accessibility in the digital world. It is a badly needed book for the general audience.