

Part I

Understanding Disabilities

To provide a proper foundation for the upcoming parts II, III and IV, an initial understanding of each disability is required and Part I provides a starting point for this. While we cannot comprehensively cover each of our four disabilities (Visual Impairments; Cognitive and Learning Impairments; Hearing Impairments; and Physical Impairments) it is our intention to, at least, cover the main problems as a starting point to facilitate further investigation. Indeed, we also cover a special case (Ageing) because older people can exhibit combinations of disabilities, often with a minor severity, but when taken together can have a significant impact on quality of life.

Pre-eminent when discussing Web accessibility is visual impairment and profound blindness, however, it should be remembered that visual disability is just one aspect of Web accessibility. Other disabilities also exist which require improvements to the Web to enable accessibility. Before considering these, it is important to consider just what accessibility really means and why it is necessary to think about ‘access’ when building Web sites.

Many disabled users consider the Web to be a primary source for information, employment and entertainment. Indeed, from questioning and contact with many disabled users we have discovered that the importance of the Web cannot be under-estimated.

“For me being online is everything. Its my hi-fi, my source of income, my supermarket, my telephone. Its my way in.”

This quote, taken from a blind user, sums up the sentiments we experience when talking with many disabled users and drives home the importance of Web accessibility in the context of independent living. *The message...* by making sites accessible we help people live more productive lives. However, the research scientist should remember that there are no ‘catch-all’ solutions to providing accessibility to Web-based resources for disabled users. Each user is an individual and each disability is unique, understanding both in isolation and in combination is one of the main challenges facing the Web accessibility researcher.