Title: Accessibility Accreditation Methods

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Description:

The members of the Research & Development Working Group (RDWG) held a research discussion on September 11, 2013 regarding the subject of website accreditation. This discussion centered on third-party and self-certification schemes looking at the historical perspective, current practices, features of such schemes, and limitation and benefits. The group also discussed some future practice considerations and possible avenues for further research.

A website accreditation is a statement that at a particular point in time this website has been evaluated according to a prescribed method, with a certain result, at which time it should be re-evaluated, and the qualification of the individual or organisation awarding the accreditation.

The consensus was that accreditation has benefits both in raising awareness of accessibility, and the ability of the organisation with a website bearing an accreditation to seek public recognition of their efforts in making their website accessible to the widest possible group of users.

Background and State-of-the-art:

It is probably not the case that just because a website carries an accreditation that the website is accessible. The discussion looked at how accreditation has been conducted in the past including the use of the ‘Bobby-Approved’ mark and also the use and misuse of the W3C logo. . The consensus was that in general, past schemes didn’t work well because of a number of problems in determining the level of accessibility of web pages in general. These attempts often fail because they did not accurately reflect the real quality of the web pages and their standards of accessibility.

The idea of accreditation was not dismissed by the group as being without merit however. In looking at the historical perspective we can see the value that they provided by raising the awareness of accessibility. Both the ‘Bobby Approved’ and RNIB ‘See It Right’ schemes demonstrated a corporate effort to promote accessibility and corporate social responsibility.

Much of the discussion centered on the purpose of an accreditation and the benefits it may provide to users as well as to the organisation seeking the accreditation. While there are obvious business benefits to an organisation who seeks accreditation, it needs to be the user who obtains the benefit. Does the ability to see/hear an accreditation mark indicate that this will be a website they will be able to use?

Problems:

Accreditation is closely bounded by accessibility testing, and as a result, all of the strengths and weaknesses of accessibility testing are inherited by accreditation methods. Yet accreditation is often sought by organisations as a means of displaying the level of effort they have put into making sure that their website is accessible. Organisations may believe they should have some means of displaying the external validation they have sought on the accessibility of the website. Or they may believe that the effort they have put into the accessibility of the website entitles them to display some sort of self-certification or accessibility compliance claim. In effect, this means putting a business case for the additional cost of pursuing accreditation of the website.

It was expressed that in the past we have focused too much on the end product, but that the process is equally important. Certain strategies were discussed including methods to see if the website has been changed in order to determine if it require a new accessibility evaluation, and the requirement to keep evidence of the state of the website at the time it was evaluated or accredited.

Goals:

Another important aspect discussed was the experience, training and expertise of those who evaluate websites and thus award accreditation. How the website was evaluated, who performed the evaluation and the purpose of the evaluation should all form part of the statement at the time of accreditation. It was also stated that the time coverage for the accreditation is important, due to the ever-changing nature of websites and that this should state at which point in time the website is due for re-evaluation. It should state who has declared the website to be accessible and to what level, what evaluation they are basing the claim on and what level of expertise they have to make such a statement.

In looking at the process, there appears to be some research that the accreditation level awarded does not always relate to a reflection of the accessibility of the website when tested by others. However it was stated that websites that meet an accessibility standard tend to be better built and they tend to have better infrastructure because they have been built by better developers who understand the ins and outs of accessibility as well as other aspects of the technology. The benefits are probably not always going to be particularly noticeable, but may include better response times for downloads for example. The websites actually run better. It’s difficult for users to actually say that this is a superior site, but the reality is that they are often better created.

Road Map:

There are unanswered questions in how useful an accreditation is to users with disabilities and whether the accreditation means that this website will be more usable for them. These areas are worthy of further research.

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