From compliance to inclusion: why digital accessibility matters

In this whitepaper

Remove online *barriers*

Let's get rid of online barriers

To give everyone the best online experience, it is vital to start focusing on digital accessibility. Every website and app must be designed and built to be easily accessible, thus making the digital world more inclusive for every user.

But ... why exactly? We have seen a clear (r)evolution from offline to online in the last two decades. Before, you went to your bank or a store in person, but now you do everything online. And you can take 'everything' quite literally. Feeling digitally excluded? Guess what: you can apply to the Belgian organization Unia if you are a victim of digital discrimination.

It's why we want to raise awareness about digital accessibility to support everyone's online experience. It's no coincidence that our company slogan is 'Experience is everything': it shows how much we focus on a positive user experience for all – including people with disabilities.

Vlada Karpovich op pexels.com

"Sorry, maar dat kan enkel online": dat is digitale uitsluiting volgens Unia

Een QR-code scannen, je identiteit verifiëren met itsme of enkel betalen met de app. Niet iedereen kan altijd evengoed mee met de digitale sneltrein. Gelijkekansencentrum Unia vindt dat er soms sprake is van discriminatie: "Door de sterke digitalisatie merken we dat hele groepen van de bevolking vaak uitgesloten worden."

Bedrijven die hun diensten enkel online aanbieden, doen aan "digitale uitsluiting".
Foto: Fabienne Van Brussel

Fabienne en Marc slachtoffer van digitale uitsluiting: "Mijn ezel lag dood in de wei. De ophaling kon ik enkel online regelen"

Marc Van Brussel en zijn dochter Fabienne zijn het slachtoffer geworden van een pijnlijk voorbeeld van "digitale uitsluiting". Bedrijven horen klantvriendelijk te zijn en hun diensten niet enkel online aan te bieden. Toch liep het verkeerd na het plotse overlijden van Marcs ezel. "Mijn vader kon de ophaling van het kadaver enkel online regelen. Maar hij heeft geen smartphone of computer en was op dat moment in shock", getuigt Fabienne in het consumentenprogramma 'WinWin' op Radio2.

"How do organisations design platforms, knowing that almost half the population is digitally vulnerable? The answer lies in the principle of e-inclusion: *they design for real people, not personas.*"

– David De Block, Public Services Director, iO

Unfortunately, the latter still needs to overcome many online and offline barriers in our society. We all want them to participate equally, but reality often hits them hard. We at iO want to remedy at least some of these barriers to ensure that everyone can use the digital products we develop anywhere, anytime.

In Belgium, as much as 25.6% of the population has a disability, according to one of the European Council's infographics on disabilities in the EU. That means more than 1 in 4 people (potentially) cannot use your digital product properly.

The older you get, the higher the chance of having a disability. This graph shows the proportion of people with a disability by age group in 2022.

From 16 to 19 years:
8%

From 20 to 24 years:
9,5%

From 25 to 34 years:
11,3%

From 35 to 44 years:
14,7%

From 45 to 64 years:
26,9%

65 years or over:
52,2%

Source: Eurostat

To clarify: when we talk about disabilities, we don't just mean visible impairments, such as wheelchair use. It also refers to people with a cognitive disability (ADD, ADHD, autism, epilepsy), people with a visual impairment (colour blindness, partially sightedness), people with a learning disability (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia), or people with a motor disability (RSI, rheumatism).

What is *digitale accessibility?*

Digital accessibility means your digital product must be sufficiently perceivable, operable, understandable and robust. These four principles are also the building blocks of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).

1. Perceivable

When you display information and user interface components to users, do it in a way that is perceivable to them. For example, some visual content can be considered difficult or even impossible for people with visual impairments to perceive. In such a case, it is important to describe the visual content via text, such as alternative text to images. This way, non-visual users have no difficulty processing that same information.

The alternative text "Google Pixel 8a" is not representative of the visual information being conveyed. Any text present on the image should also be made available as alternative text.

2. Operable

The components of your user interface and navigation must be operable. For example, some people will operate your digital product only through a keyboard or technology that resembles a keyboard. Thus, of all the functionalities that users can click on with a mouse, make sure there are similar options for keyboard users. The same goes for people who use touch screens or voice controls as input devices: they should also be able to operate your digital product.

Fortunately, you don't need to know all the nuances of all possible devices, as long as you at least have the keyboard, mouse, touchscreen, and voice controls right.

3. Understandable

The information and operation of the user interface should be presented clearly, concisely and easily. This means using simple language, providing clear instructions, logically organising the content, and ensuring that the meaning and purpose of the content are easy to understand.

This principle aims to ensure that all users, including those with cognitive or language limitations, can easily understand and interpret the information on a website or in an application.

4. Robust

When developing information, you must guarantee that it can be reliably interpreted by various platforms and devices, including assistive technology and various web browsers.

Think of assistive technology like screen readers, screen magnifiers, or speech recognition software, for example. According to this principle, it is important that the components of your digital product have enough resilience to remain accessible in any situation.

Why is *digitale accessibility* important?

Reaching the widest possible *audience*

Let's focus on the numbers for a moment. Worldwide, 16% of the population has a disability: that's a stunning 1.3 billion people. In Europe, it is even 25% of the population, which is 101 million people. In Belgium, 25.6% of the population has a disability of some sort, which means 2.97 million people.

16%	25%	25,4%
Worldwide	**Europe**	**Belgium**
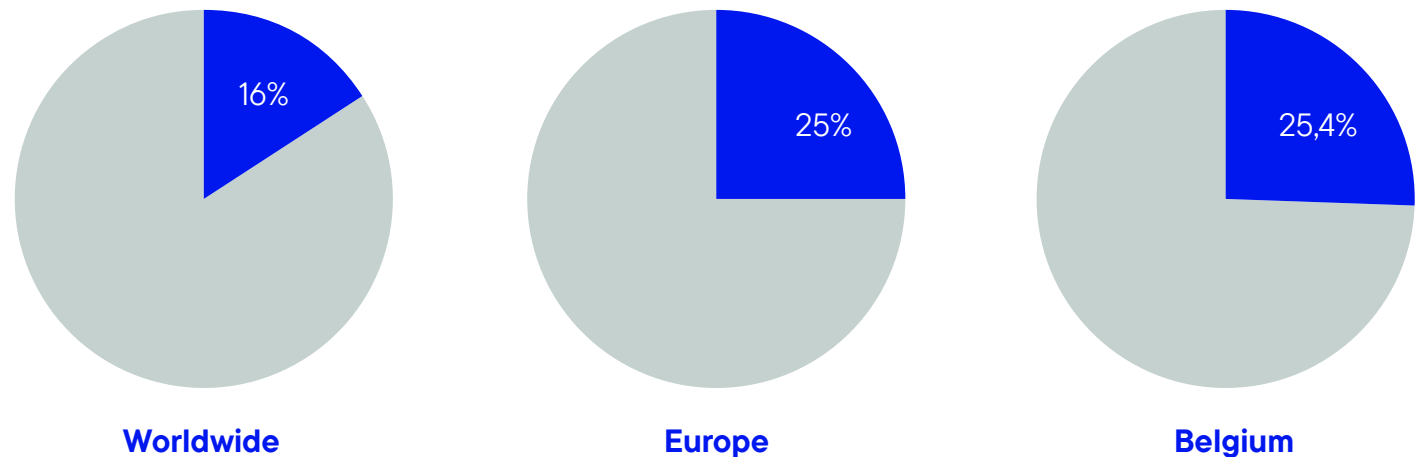
That's a remarkable potential market share for your digital product. Even if you are only targeting one certain segment of the population, a valuable part of your audience may still not be able to use your digital product because you don't respect one or more of the four principles of digital accessibility.

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Improve the overall *user experience*

The four principles of digital accessibility align closely with web design's best practices.

When designers consider accessibility criteria such as consistent navigation, easy-to-read content, intuitive interactions, and simple component operation, they help create an optimal user experience.

Improve your *brand reputation*

Accessibility plays a big role in how consumers view your brand.

If you prioritize accessibility as a brand, you show that all consumers are important to you and that you are committed to delivering a fair user experience for everyone. It will improve your brand's reputation and promote loyalty among consumers who value inclusion and social responsibility.

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Accessibility *drives* innovation

Designing for people with disabilities requires innovative thinking. Embracing people with disabilities challenges companies to be more creative, creating unexpected and groundbreaking solutions that help everyone.

When you walk out the door, you'll see many examples of the benefits of inclusion. Consider, for example, lowered curbs. These were initially intended to help wheelchair users, but they now ensure that parents with strollers, cyclists changing streets, and pedestrians can easily get on and off the pavement.

Accessibility guidelines, often seen as obstacles by people without disabilities, have always provided innovative solutions beyond conventional limits.

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What about digital accessibility *legislation*?

When designing digital products, you currently need to consider two pieces of legislation: the Web Accessibility Directive and the European Accessibility Act.

1. Web Accessibility Directive (Directive (EU) 2016/2102)

The Web Accessibility Directive (WAD) is European legislation that focuses on government agency websites and mobile applications. This directive is currently in force in all European Union member states, including Belgium. The deadline to make websites accessible was Sept. 23, 2020, and for mobile applications, it was June 23, 2021.

In Belgium, the implementation and enforcement of the Web Accessibility Directive are regulated by the regions. For example, the Flemish government has drafted its own decree, the Flemish Government Decree on the Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Government Agencies.

This decree sets out the obligations of Flemish government agencies to make their digital channels accessible. It requires government agencies' websites and mobile applications to comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 at level AA.

2. European Accessibility Act (Directive (EU) 2019/882)

The European Accessibility Act (EAA) is a European directive that improves the accessibility of general products and services for people with disabilities. Thus, unlike the Web Accessibility Directive, this law will focus not only on public institutions but on all European products and services that have a clear impact on society.

These regulations will go into effect from June 28, 2025. So from that day on, your digital product must meet the same European standard as the Web Accessibility Directive, namely WCAG 2.1 at level AA.

Services

The EAA will apply to various services such as e-commerce, e-books, audiovisual media services, websites, telephone services, transport tickets for air, bus, train, and water transport, banking and financial services.

Notably, 'e-commerce' applies to any business that offers services through a website or app which enters into an agreement with consumers. If money is paid online, it probably falls under e-commerce. Examples include online stores, subscription news websites, and streaming subscriptions.

Products

The EAA also applies to products such as smartphones, computers and operating systems, terminals such as ATMs and card systems, TV equipment with digital television or Internet service, and e-readers.

How do you comply with the *European accessibility standard?*

Ensure your website meets WCAG 2.1 level AA requirements, and don't forget to provide an accessibility statement.

1. Guidelines

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) offer different techniques by success criteria on how to make your digital product accessible.

Each success criterion in the WCAG is described by

→ a conformance level (A, AA or AAA)

→ a principle (observable, operable, understandable or robust)

→ a guideline

→ a unique identifier

→ a description

→ techniques (sufficient and advisory)

→ examples.

2. Accessibility statement

By adding an accessibility statement to your digital product, you provide transparency about its accessibility. What exactly goes into it is up to you, but you can consider choosing from these elements:

→ **Purpose:** describe the statement's purpose and stress why you consider digital accessibility so important.

→ **Legal framework:** refer to relevant laws and regulations.

→ **Compliance status:** give an overview of the extent to which the website meets accessibility requirements.

→ **Exceptions:** indicate which parts or functionalities do not meet the requirements (yet), explain why and list the alternative solutions you added.

→ **Improvement measures:** describe your steps and plans to improve accessibility.

→ **Contact information:** mention where users may contact you for feedback and questions and how they can report accessibility issues.

The goal is to give users insight into accessibility status and encourage organisations to improve digital accessibility.

Getting started with accessibility and e-inclusion

When it comes to accessibility, there's one crucial principle you should always keep in mind: design for real people, not personas.

Making progress is more important than doing everything perfectly the first time. When getting started with accessibility, it's best to take a pragmatic approach. Implement incremental improvements and build on your existing successes.

We identified three key areas where small improvements can have a big impact on e-inclusion:

→ **User experience design**

→ **Service design**

→ **Change management**

1. User experience design

You can make a lot of progress in terms of user experience, but the implementation sometimes leaves a lot to be desired. This is how you make the user experience of your services and products more inclusive:

→ **Research and testing with real people:** Perfect personas don't exist in real life. Therefore, carry out user tests with real humans, so that you can find out which problems you can solve for them.

→ **Use clear language:** Your target group will be happier with text written in easy to understand, everyday language. You're not dumbing down your text but opening up your communication to a wider group of people.

→ **Be accessible:** 71% of customers with accessibility needs click away from websites they find difficult to use. Follow web accessibility guidelines to remove barriers and make your platform usable by a wider audience.

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2. Service design

It is best to make new and existing services as human as possible — and they should also be aligned with your organisation's goals. Here's how to make service design more inclusive:

→ **Address technical debt:** A complex UI is often the result of complex underlying systems, both technical and organisational. Analyse the impact of technical debt and identify what needs to change to move forward.

→ **Design for stress cases, not best cases:** Make sure your services and products aren't just practical in the ideal scenario. Even — and especially — at more challenging moments, users need to be able to navigate your digital services easily.

→ **Implement a two-track policy:** Digital inclusion is all about leaving no one behind. Be sure to provide an alternative for people who can't use your digital solutions.

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3. Change management

Do you want to implement relevant changes that help your organisation, employees, customers, and partners move forward? Of course you do! But make sure you do it the right way — digitally inclusive. Here's how to make change management more inclusive:

→ **Build empathy:** Record user tests and show the videos to your senior management and employees. This way, your teams can build empathy with the target audience — digitally vulnerable or not.

→ **Start small:** You can't make impactful changes overnight. Start with small short-term victories and create a broader support base.

→ **Digital inclusion by design:** Inclusion was one of the design principles of Tim Berners Lee, the creator of the World Wide Web, from the beginning. It is high time we did something about it.

Hey iO, can you help me?

Of course, we can. We know that's a lot of focus points, requirements, and things to be reckoned with. But don't worry—we have you covered. We'll guide your digital product to full compliance with WCAG 2.1 AA through a personalised accessibility roadmap.

These are the steps we take:

→ Definition of scope and prioritisation

→ Evaluation through audits according to the WCAG-EM method

→ Guidance in drafting an accessibility statement

→ Technical analysis and elaboration of the WCAG criteria

→ Training for different profiles involved in your digital product

→ Monitoring to maintain the compliance level in the future

(Read more about our accessibility services →)

"I firmly believe that digital accessibility is not a luxury but a fundamental right. It is our responsibility to break down barriers and create inclusive digital experiences that allow everyone, regardless of ability, to participate. By including accessibility in every story, we are laying the foundation for a more inclusive and equitable digital landscape."

- Tim Dujardin, Head of Accessibility, iO

Request an accessibility audit

Want to know how your website, mobile apps or other digital platforms are doing in terms of accessibility? Engage our experts for an accessibility audit.

Contact us at
business@iodigital.com

Case: How can you give all Belgian citizens online travel advice?

Travelling is great – getting away, exploring new horizons, meeting wonderful people! Yet, planning such a trip can be pretty stressful. Do you need a travel pass? Or a vignette to drive into your dream city? And should you go wild camping or not? The Federal Government had all the answers, although finding them could be challenging.

The federal government therefore entrusted iO with a crucial mission: to create a platform that consolidates all information from the various Belgian embassies. This platform was designed to be as accessible as possible for all citizens, providing them with a one-stop solution to their travel queries. The aim was to alleviate the stress associated with travel planning, allowing citizens to embark on their trips with confidence and peace of mind.
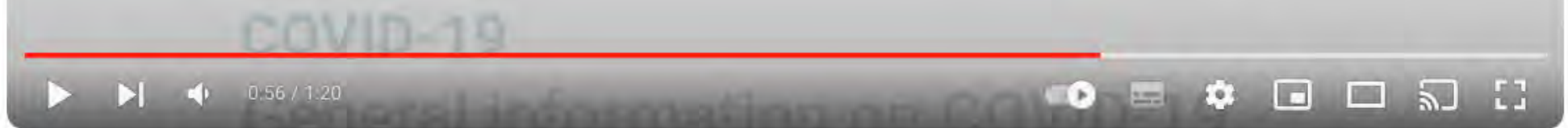
Read the full case →

Case
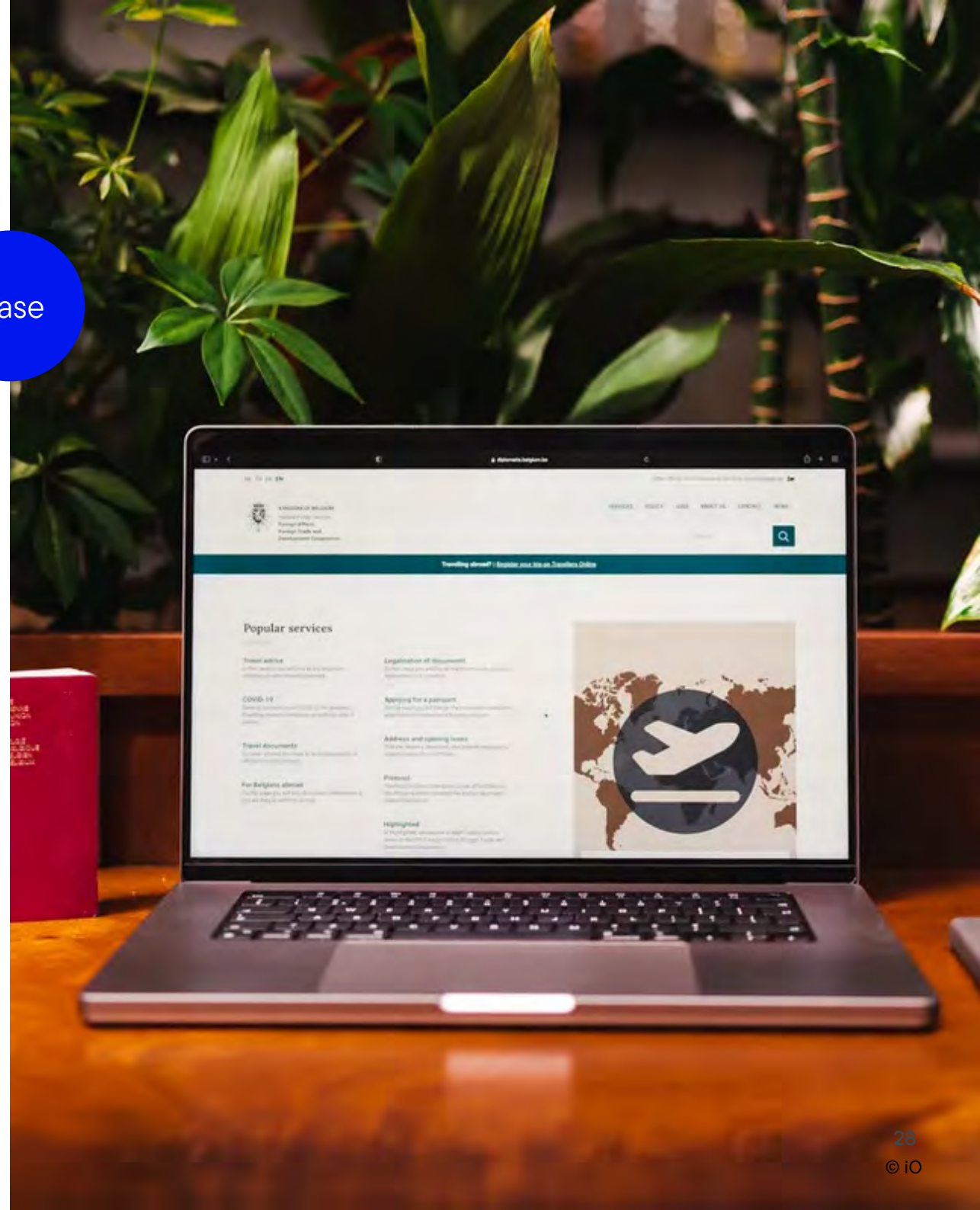
and **blind** people.

Travel advice
In this section you will find all the

[Watch the video →]

COVID-19

▶ ⏭ 🔊 0:56 / 1:20

CASE MOVIE SITE AFFAIRE ETRANGERE

iO
271 abonnees

[Abonneren]

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