WebAim Project Consults Fortune 500 Companies | CPD

One factor in web accessibility is whether a website is navigable by using the keyboard, since some users with disabilities cannot use a mouse. A team of web accessibility experts at Utah State University has been working with two high-profile, Fortune 500 clients’ websites. Unfortunately, the experts at WebAIM can’t name those companies. While representatives from both high-powered WebAIM clients are sincerely working to improve their websites, they don’t want to draw attention to the accessibility problems they are trying to fix—hence the nondisclosure agreement. WebAIM is an initiative of the Center for Persons with Disabilities and Utah State University. Its goal is to improve web accessibility for people with disabilities. Web accessibility is a concept that’s catching. As the baby boomer generation ages, more and more consumers are likely to have conditions that would make it harder to use—and do business on—an inaccessible site. “One of the things with several of the clients we’re working with is a lot of them are realizing the market potential,” said Jared Smith, WebAIM’s associate director. Litigation is another motivator. Websites that are inaccessible to people with disabilities have become the subject of lawsuits, including a notable class action suit against Target Corporation filed in US District Court in the northern district of California. According to the terms of the 2008 settlement, Target never admitted that its website was inaccessible. Still, the company paid out $6,000,000 to the class action claimants and millions more in legal fees. The lawsuit has motivated some companies to take a second look at their websites, said Smith. Two common problems are related to compatibility with screen readers, which speak screen content out loud for people who are unable to read the text. Sometimes websites are missing alternative text, or the wording that explains an image to people who use screen readers. Another garden-variety problem is a heading that looks like a heading but is not coded like one, since screen reader users and people with motor impairments will often tab from heading to heading. A lot of accessibility problems are centered around how usable a computer keyboard is on a website, Smith said. Users with disabilities often cannot use a mouse. Fixing these problems can be tricky, since a retrofit of a website is much harder than designing a site to be accessible in the first place. One company chose to put off making improvements until their next website redesign; another works in accessibility by targeting the most-used pages first. Sometimes a third party handles the web design. These factors all affect how quickly a company addresses accessibility problems, even when management is firmly behind the concept. However the problems are addressed, Smith said training is an important element in WebAIM’s work, since an accessible design can be modified and rendered inaccessible again. It’s a lot more effective if web designers understand accessibility on their own. The WebAIM team’s next training is on June 10-11 in Logan, Utah.