

Everyone has disability

By Heidi Laidler, User Experience Designer, Media Access Australia

Accessible design isn't just designing for a minority group who identify as having a permanent ongoing impairment. At its core, accessibility is about designing for diverse user needs and it benefits everyone, because everyone has disability.

With the increased awareness around user experience, most newly developed products, apps and websites undergo usability testing throughout the design process. Yet, there is a significant limitation to this testing, if it's not done across a diverse range of people.

Generally, usability testing is conducted in a testing environment — usually a small, quiet space with chairs and maybe a desk. Each user is able to focus on performing the required tasks without contextual variables — and in this environment, the needs of users are fixed.

User needs are fluid, not fixed

However, outside these testing environments, user needs are not fixed, they're not the same for every person, they're not the same in every context, and they're not the same all of the time. People's needs are fluid — and among many things, they can vary depending on each person's surroundings, activities or illnesses.

A user may be able to perform a task or perceive information in a certain way in one context, but not be able to in another. To illustrate this point, here are some examples:

- **Situation:** Using your mobile phone while in the sun at the beach.

Disability = Reduced colour vision due to sun glare.

- **Situation:** Making a phone call while driving.

Disability = Vision impairment as you must pay attention to your surroundings and cannot look at your phone.

Disability = Mobility impairment, as you must use both hands to drive and cannot touch your phone.

- **Situation:** Using your phone while standing on a busy bus or train.

Disability = Mobility impairment, as one arm is required to hold on to keep balance.

- **Situation:** Mother nursing a newborn baby while working on a laptop.

Disability = Mobility impairment, as the mother must use one arm to hold the baby.

- **Situation:** Making a presentation in a classroom using a projector.

Disability = Reduced colour vision, as projectors generally have lower contrast compared to computer displays.

A group of diverse people



- **Situation:** Watching a movie late at night.
Disability = Reduced hearing, as turning the volume up may wake other people in your household.

And here are some examples of temporary disabilities — which serve to demonstrate that the term ‘disability’ doesn’t always refer to something permanent or ongoing. Disability can be the result of illness, environment or an activity.

- **Temporary state:** Light-sensitive migraine.
Disability = Vision impairment, as unable to look at a screen.

- **Temporary state:** Broken arm.
Disability = Mobility impairment as must rely on only one arm.
- **Temporary state:** Ear infection.
Disability = Reduced hearing or hearing loss.

These examples demonstrate that every person has disability, sometimes temporarily and differing depending on the context. Designing for accessibility allows users to overcome these contextual and temporary limitations through allowing them to interact with products, applications and websites in flexible ways.

Like to know more?

For lots of helpful advice and more information on how to ensure that your online apps, digital communications and school website are accessible to students and staff of all abilities, visit the website of Media Access Australia www.mediaaccess.org.au, a leading not-for-profit organisation dedicated to web and digital access.

To get in touch with Media Access Australia, contact Philip Jenkinson, the charity’s Senior Marketing Executive. He can be emailed at philip.jenkinson@mediaaccess.org.au