Miami Lighthouse for the Blind Can Assist with Website Accessibility

BY LOIS THOMSON

"There is no reason why hospitals should not have accessible websites." "Accessible," in this instance, is referring to sites being available to those who are blind or visually impaired, and the speaker is Virginia Jacko, president and CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind.

Jacko, who herself is blind, understands the issues people have if they are not able to navigate a company's website because of vision difficulties, and she likened it to those who are confined to a wheelchair. "In the past, people who were in wheelchairs were not able to get into the buildings of a business – into a hospital, for example – because there were only stairs. Then the law changed and ramps were put in."

She then equated websites that aren't accessible to "stairs for the wheelchair community." However, with the assistance of Miami Lighthouse, businesses will be able to comply with regulations that require accessibility. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, and one segment is Title III, which requires accessibility in terms of public accommodations; and as Jacko explained, websites are extensions of places of public accommodation.

The idea of visually impaired people finding their way around a website is daunting, but Jacko is quick with the answer: "The way I interact with the computer is with keystroke commands that are interfacing and telling me what's on the monitor; they enable me to navigate to wherever I need to go. I can read any spreadsheet, I can schedule an appointment, I can shop on the internet – as long as the website is compliant with accessibility standards."

That last phrase – "as long as the website is compliant" – is the key, and that's what Miami Lighthouse can assist companies in doing. Because some websites aren't accessible, lawsuits are being filed against businesses under Title III, but Jacko has a team that is able to put everything in place and has helped various industries, including hospitals, doctors' offices, transportation, entertainment, and state and county governments.

Accessibility is important in any industry, but using hospitals as an example, she said, "In a hospital, you might need to make an appointment to get an X-ray, or for your lab work. Or you may need to look at your bill." Jackson Health System is one hospital

Virginia Jacko

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that has taken advantage of Miami Lighthouse's services. Jacko added that statistics show that one out of four seniors age 75 or older will have uncorrectable vision loss. "These are your patients," she said, referring to medical facilities. "People now in their 70s have grown up with computers, so they expect to be able to schedule appointments, not be shut out. So it's not just for the legally blind, it's really for everybody."

The Miami Lighthouse tech team comprises three members who are visually impaired; two have degrees in computer science, and one is working toward one. Jacko mentioned in particular Bill Rivera, who she said "is totally blind just like I am, but he is a more powerful IT guy than anybody I've run into."

Rivera said, "I cannot see anything at all, I have no light perception. To work on the computer, I don't use the mouse, I just use the keyboard and a screen reader program that echoes information on the computer screen back to me audibly. It's called JAWS – Job Access With Speech. There is no reason why a person can't be employed as long as the entity has a website that is compliant, and the person is able to run JAWS on the computer. So it's not only good in terms of people conducting health-related business on the internet, but it also is good for employment."

For people who have limited sight, accessibility may just be a matter of making a few adjustments. Rivera explained that some users who go to websites are not able to see the text clearly because the font size is too small, or there is not enough contrast between the background and foreground. "It's especially difficult for persons who have color blindness. It's important for website developers to have a color pallet that has high contrast on images." And Jacko clarified, "We're not suggesting that anybody change their branding; the issue is on the contrast."

As Jacko concluded, "We want people who are visually impaired to have complete capability for any technology. Technology is changing, but as long as it's properly designed, it can be good for business and good for employment; and in the health care industry, it can be good for patients."

For more information, visit www.miamilighthouse.org/ WebsiteAccessibilityAuditing.asp or call Virginia Jacko at (305) 856-4176.