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Article

Becoming a Thriving and Responsible Business: Adopting Accessibility

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Making your business more accessible benefits disabled people and could help you adhere to equality legislation. But did you know that it could also be great for business? Research has shown that accessible businesses can benefit from more customers, improve brand reputation, and increase sales. So, what could accessibility mean for a small business like yours?

In this article:

- Definitions of accessibility and their implications for small businesses
- Five business benefits of becoming more accessible
- Practical steps your business could take towards accessibility

Definitions

Accessibility is about ensuring your business environment works for all your staff and customers, whatever their physical and cognitive abilities[1]. Making your business more accessible could mean taking practical steps, like installing ramps or improving your online communication. But it could also mean evolving your mindset and business values.

Typically, accessible businesses might be more modern, forward-thinking and inclusive, which can improve experiences for disabled and non-disabled staff alike.[2]

Five reasons why accessibility is good for business

It might be easy to consider Accessibility and Inclusion as a 'nice-to-have'. However, research suggests accessibility is more than box-ticking exercises to accommodate disabled people. Below are five reasons why improving your approach to accessibility could deliver tangible business benefits.

1. More customers

It may seem obvious, but widening access to your business could encourage more people to buy your products and services. There are 16 million disabled people in the UK, who, along with their households, spend £274 billion in the UK every year. Yet, according to disability charity Scope, 73% of disabled online shoppers have faced barriers accessing websites, and four in ten disabled people find their local shops inaccessible.[3] Becoming more accessible could unlock a significantly broader customer base and grow your revenue.

2. Improved reputation

Customers and staff today increasingly value businesses that display a positive and active approach to accessibility. Research has shown that over 80% of people reported feeling negatively towards brands that fail on accessibility, while 40% would not purchase from or recommend those brands.[4] However, building a good reputation for accessibility may improve how much customers are likely to trust you.[4]

3. Customer loyalty

Accessibility could help build richer and longer-lasting relationships with your customers. Whether in-person or online, people who can easily access your products and services are more likely to become repeat customers – because they know you understand and cater to their needs. When customers feel valued, they are more likely to feel warmly towards your brand and give you positive word-of-mouth.[5]

4. Access to talent

As a small business owner, you're likely to be familiar with the challenges of recruiting and retaining the best staff. A recent study

showed that 70% of small businesses felt that competition for talent has increased, and 77% had difficulty attracting experienced candidates.[6] By embracing accessibility, your business could widen the net to more talent and strengthen your competitive advantage in the recruitment market. Between 2019 and 2022, over half of small businesses in the UK employed a disabled person or someone with a health condition.[7]

5. Legal compliance

In 2010, the Equality Act was introduced to protect people from discrimination (replacing the Disability Discrimination Act).[8] Specifically, the Act requires small businesses to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure disabled people are not treated unfairly.[9] Reasonable adjustments for your business could depend on many factors, including turnover, practicality, and potential customer and staff benefits. Ensuring your business is legally compliant could protect you from fines, legal action, and reputational damage.

With so many benefits, it makes good business sense to become an accessible company.

Practical steps towards becoming a more accessible business

Small businesses have more restricted budgets and resources than large corporations to invest in accessibility. However, you might also be more agile and adaptable than your big business counterparts. Here, we outline three areas to help you think about the small – and larger – steps you could take towards becoming more accessible.

- **Learn and understand**

A good starting point might be to learn more about what an accessible small business looks like, reflect on what your company could do to improve, and develop an appropriate and realistic accessibility plan.

Your employees and customers with accessibility needs are the best people to learn from. For example, disabled people may benefit from modifications to your physical environment or how you communicate or present information.

Before, during, and after you have taken action to improve your business's accessibility, you can ask for feedback – whether face-to-face or through other channels, such as suggestion boxes or simple surveys.

- **Make physical modifications**

Physical modifications to your workplace can offer more than practical support for people with disabilities; they are a visible sign that you intend to create a welcoming, inclusive environment.

Wide doorways, corridors and aisles benefit people who require mobility aids, such as wheelchairs or crutches. Low seating, counters,

shelves and tables could also make your business more comfortable for a broader range of people. To be fully accessible, you could consider installing ramps and having at least one accessible toilet, with features such as hand and grab rails, motion sensor lighting and an emergency pull cord.

Some of these improvements may not be possible for small businesses operating in smaller, often rented spaces. But there are other adjustments you could make with relatively little upheaval.

For example, ensuring all your signage is printed in large type, clear and easy to read can help visually and cognitively impaired people. Excessively noisy environments can present barriers for people with hearing or sensory impairments, so you might want to consider what you can do to reduce noise – or create quiet areas. It could be worth remembering that accessible environments are bright and well-lit, too

- **Make technical modifications**

However your small business uses computers – from internal systems and communication for employees through to your website, social media and email platforms for customers – straightforward modifications could eliminate barriers and create more inclusive experiences.

To begin with, you could conduct a digital accessibility audit to help make sure everyone can access your products and services online. Accessibility best practices include using CamelCase for hashtags in social media, alternative text for images, contrasting colour schemes and closed captioning for video.[10]

You could also ensure that staff can access assistive technologies, such as magnifiers, screen readers and relevant ergonomic equipment if they need them.

Accessibility is an increasingly essential consideration for any small business. It is valued by customers, welcomed by employees, and offers opportunities for income generation and competitive advantage. Accessibility can also be a key step towards creating a more inclusive environment for your colleagues and customers – which is good for people and can also be great for business.

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