

# WebAIM Celebrates 25 Years of Improving Access to Online Information for People With Disabilities

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WebAIM's purpose is to expand the potential of the internet for people with disabilities.

At the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice, this year marks 25 years that WebAIM (or Web Accessibility in Mind) has been improving online access for people with disabilities. The center is housed within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at Utah State University. WebAIM's purpose is to expand the potential of the internet for people with disabilities by empowering individuals and organizations to create and deliver accessible content. As such, this organization is now one of the leading providers of web accessibility expertise worldwide, providing comprehensive accessibility solutions for the past two and a half decades.

WebAIM's origins date back to 1997 when founder Cyndi Rowland was demonstrating a website design at a professional meeting and took a question from a visually impaired man who asked if he could visit the website. She gave him the website's URL, then she wondered how the blind experience websites. She started researching, and the results startled her. She learned that people who cannot see a screen or navigate with a mouse rely on assistive technology to read screens, but the technology meets significant barriers if the websites are not built with accessibility in mind.

"I've spent my entire career in the disability space. I like technology. And if I didn't understand this concept, how could anybody else understand it?" says Rowland. "I felt compelled more than I ever had in my lifetime towards

action because I realized this was such a narrow space and largely unknown.



Jared Smith, WebAIM director, and Cyndi Rowland, WebAIM founder

Rowland did not doubt the internet would soon have an enormous impact on society, but she also knew that many people with disabilities would be unable to use it effectively. At the same time, she was developing an online course for special educators. "The whole notion that someone with a disability couldn't take the course that I'd developed because it was online stung," she said.

So, she went home and started writing grants. When Rowland was awarded funding from the U.S. Department of Education, the seeds for WebAIM were planted. WebAIM was not the first or the only organization working on web accessibility, but it was a pioneer in a field that was, as Rowland put it, a "weird niche."

Rowland explains that web accessibility is less understood by the masses, and it is important to close that gap. "We've got to make it so it's not weird anymore." In the education field, for example, one bad technology procurement at the state or district level can do a lot to set back any progress that has already been made. The people making the decisions need to know about accessibility and how important it is.

WebAIM was officially created in late 1999. In the decades since, the center has evolved from a small grant-funded project to an internationally recognized leader in web accessibility consulting and research. WebAIM has provided a free tool for evaluating accessibility (WAVE); offered training to web designers in business, government, and education; launched an online discussion board (listserv); and distributed numerous surveys to ensure that the guidelines they are providing align with the needs of users with disabilities.

WebAIM Director Jared Smith has been part of the organization for 24 of its 25 years. In that time, he has seen awareness of online accessibility take off. "One of WebAIM's primary missions has been to increase awareness, and we've accomplished that," he said. "We

see job postings on web accessibility. And there are dedicated professionals and hundreds of companies out there doing web accessibility. We've seen tremendous growth."

*Learn more about [WebAIM](#) and the center's [25th anniversary](#).*

Although web developers understand the concept, they don't always build their websites to accessibility standards. In fact, WebAIM's latest survey of the world's leading one million websites revealed an average of 57.8 errors per homepage. "The most common accessibility issues today are the same ones we saw 25 years ago," explained Smith. These include missing alternate text, failing to identify a document's language, and buttons and links that are not identified so the screen reader doesn't know where they lead or what information needs to be added.

"We've seen this massive growth of the web itself, and it's been a challenge for those of us working in accessibility to keep up with that expansion and the innovations on the web," said Smith. He says that these new innovations add both possibilities and challenges. For instance, mobile apps give people with disabilities a new way to access content.

Smith continues, "It's really beneficial for users with disabilities to have a mobile mechanism. The difficulty is that often accessibility isn't considered in those mobile apps, which can introduce additional barriers for those users, especially for screen reader users. Part of that is because testing on mobile apps is more difficult than it is for web pages, so very often accessibility is overlooked or isn't tested well."

Artificial intelligence is another mixed blessing. "I think the potential of AI is exciting," Smith said. "For instance, right now AI can analyze images on a web page that don't have alternative text and can provide descriptions of those images. But the difficulty is that the description is usually limited to what the image looks like. It may not be able to determine the intent and actual content of that image for the user. The danger of that is developers might start to rely on it. We may have website owners say, 'AI can describe images. Why do I need to provide alternative text at all?'"

Overall, Rowland is encouraged by the growth of web accessibility she's seen over the years, recognizing that more people are aware of web accessibility now than ever before. But she still sees room for growth. "What we have is a few people who know a lot about accessibility. What we need is a lot of people who know a little about accessibility."