

The U.S. Access Board Ruling on Updates for Section 508 by the End of 2013

The U.S. Access Board, a federal agency committed to accessible design, reported last week that the long-awaited update of the most widely-used government electronic accessibility standards, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, will include the integration of the World Wide Web Consortium's WCAG 2.0 recommended standards. The ruling is scheduled to be finalized as soon as the end of this year.

WCAG, or Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, were developed by the international accessible design community. They make specific recommendations for web development that will ensure the web sites are accessible to all people, including those living with disabilities. The 2.0 standards levels ensures a higher level of accessibility that will assist more people in having access to online information and also encourage design that will accommodate a wider range of devices that help people access the internet, such as screen reader and speech recognition software.

"WCAG is an excellent guide to making any website or online venue accessible to all people, regardless of their ability or disability" sited Lynn Wehrman, President of WeCo, a company which specialized in web site accessibility verification. "The attention WCAG is getting from replacing Section 508 indicates that the marketplace, and the government, are viewing accessibility as a part of everyday online access. Making your website accessible is no longer a suggestion or an added bonus. It will determine who gets more of the market share, who qualifies for federal programs and dollars and essentially, who stays relevant in the eyes of a more aware public."

The adoption of WCAG 2.0 within a federal law means that the US is moving closer to unifying web access standards with the rest of the world. It is rumored that the European Union, which recently adopted WCAG 1.0 as a standard, is also moving towards 2.0 adoption.

"When standards as widely-accepted and applied as the WCAG become a part of the US legal landscape, it changes not only how we build websites, but also how we verify that they are accessible," commented Wehrman. "Because WCAG conformance guidance includes human verification, people living with disabilities will finally be included in the process of ensuring online venues are accessible to them. This is monumental. Most prior verification has been done by machines, which automated testing firms admit are accurate only 25-40% of the time in lieu of human testing."

According to WC3 document "Understanding Conformance" it states that "All WCAG 2.0 Success Criteria are written as testable criteria for objectively determining if content satisfies them. Testing the Success Criteria would involve a combination of automated testing and human evaluation. The content should be tested by those who understand how people with different types of disabilities use the Web."

<http://www.w3.org/TR/UNDERSTANDING-WCAG20/conformance.html>