Senior Certified Test Consultant Nina

Nina has been blind for 18 of her 31 years. She's had plenty of time to learn how to use the Internet – and plenty of time to gauge how frustrating that can be for a person with a disability.

For the past year, Nina has worked to ease that frustration as a Certified Test Consultant for WeCo, a two-year-old firm that works to make websites accessible to the disabled.

She is one of 23 consultants at the company. Consultants have a variety of disabilities – sight, hearing, motor skills and cognitive – and range from those who are just developing a disability to those who, like Nina, have had one for years.

Access to the Web - Challenges to Overcome

The Internet has opened new frontiers in communications. Because a website can combine moving or still pictures with sound, graphics and other features, it can tell a story in a variety of ways at the same time. But the very features that make a site attractive to a non-disabled person can stymie someone with physical challenges.

Graphics created for the seeing world, of course, present the greatest difficulty for the blind. Some of those difficulties would hardly occur to a seeing person; some are security measures that the able-bodied take for granted. "I find it especially hard if you're trying to create new accounts," Nina says. "There's always that box that says 'type in the characters.' I have no idea what that looks like." She often must call on help from a seeing person.

Even a blind person who uses a screen reader, as Nina does, enters another layer of confusion. "If a website has a link that's a graphic but they don't label the graphic correctly, I won't know what that link is. The labeling that my screen reader recognizes is just a whole bunch of letters and

numbers. Sometimes I have to click into each graphical link to find out what that link is supposed to represent. Depending on how many links there are, you have to go through each of them one by one just so you can get to the one that you want."

Even if there are fewer links on the page, if the links are located at the bottom a blind person must listen to the entire copy block through the screen reader to get to the link she may want, Nina says.

Other problems arise with Flash players – the buttons to move through a sound bite often aren't labeled by the screen reader – and automatic page refreshing, which causes Nina to lose her place in the copy and requires her to start all over by finding the article. "And by the time I'm going to get to it, it's going to refresh again," she says.

Even if the screen reader works, the music that can come with pop-up ads can be too loud, causing Nina to scramble for a button that will turn it off.

And those are just the problems encountered by the blind. Different disabilities present different challenges. For someone whose attention span is shortened by ADHD, for example, a website simply may be too busy, making it all but impossible to navigate.

Nina finds those cluttered websites the most problematic. "There's so much going on sometimes that it's just too much to go through, and it's confusing," she says. "It probably looks great, but for me who doesn't really care what it looks like, it's terrible."

Working with WeCo

Nina and all other consultants undergo extensive, rigorous training developed by WeCo. That includes training in section 508 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which says that any entity receiving federal funds, as most of the company's current clients do, must be fully accessible to the disabled (and while the Internet did not yet exist in 1973, the law's provisions cover the online world). The training also covers business ethics, confidentiality, privacy and other subjects consultants must know.

WeCo consultants are also given technical training regarding particular problem areas to look for and how to document them so that clients can then make changes to improve the accessibility of their web presence. That is where the consultants' personal experience comes in. "You just go through a test case the way you would if you were just doing it in real life " Nina says. "It's based on your own experience and your own thoughts. There's no right or wrong answers, just how you feel about it. That's more helpful than trying to find the 'right' answer."

Testing is done by teams of consultants with varying types and levels of disabilities. The process can take anywhere from a half-hour to a full day, depending on how extensive the client's needs are. Nina was once part of a team that worked on a single site for five days.