

Steve Grobschmidt. (2010). Interview with Jennison Asuncion Pars 1-3. The art of web accessibility. Retrieved September 1, 2010, from <http://www.theaccessibility.com/2010/02/jennison-asuncion/>

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Interview with Jennison Asuncion

February 14th, 2010 by Steve | Filed under [Accessibility Interview](#).

Over the next few blog posts, I'm excited to share an interview I recently conducted over email with Jennison Asuncion. Residing in the Toronto, Canada area, Jennison's understanding of accessibility, as he'll explain shortly, comes from the well-rounded position of being involved in both the corporate business world as well as academia. In his own words he also has "first-hand knowledge born from being an end-user who happens to be blind."

Jennison is also a respected, insightful voice in the social media world, on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#) in particular.

Steve (SG): Tell us a little about yourself. What do you do in the field of web accessibility?



Jennison (JA): I'm a big jazz and live comedy fan, a shameless networker, and I enjoy cross-country skiing.

In terms of the field of web accessibility, I work in Toronto for one of Canada's banks. Part of my role involves consulting with developers so that what they are putting out there is as accessible as it can be to either our employees or clients with disabilities.

Somewhat related, by night, I co-direct the [Adaptech Research Network](#), where we have been conducting research into the use and accessibility of information and communication technologies by college and university students with visible and non-visible disabilities for over ten years. This has helped me build perspective on the wide-range of experiences of end-users with a variety of disabilities who interact with technology which I take into my day-job. I really feel lucky to have a foot in both the corporate accessibility and the academic research areas for that reason.

SG: Why did you take an interest in the subject?

JA: Without wanting to overstate the obvious, the Web is such a part of many of our lives, professionally, recreationally, and personally. This is only set to increase, and at a faster pace. Case in point, look at all of the social media tools out there.

The web has also opened up so many opportunities that might not have been possible say four or five years ago for everyone, but especially for people with disabilities. So, doing my part to assure that this landscape can be made as accessible as possible just feels like the right thing to be doing.

SG: In your experience in the field of web accessibility, what sorts of things about people with disabilities using the Internet have surprised you the most?

JA: How resourceful and willing a good number of users with disabilities are in figuring out ways to make a website work for them, even though it's not necessarily that accessible to begin with. I'm not saying that's the ideal situation whatsoever, but, for example, as challenging as, say Facebook can be from an accessibility perspective for some, there are folks with disabilities who have found ways to make features and functionality work for them.

The other thing that doesn't surprise me, as much as it serves as something I need to always remember, is that there is still a whole group of users with disabilities, who are not tech-savvy and connected through things like Twitter, who may be using older versions of adaptive hardware and/or software who are out there. With little to no formal training, many of them come online to check their e-mail, may do a bit of online browsing, and that's about it. Or they only use a computer at work, not at home. They know nothing about Accessible Rich Internet Applications (ARIA), and/or may not be able to afford to upgrade their systems.

It's those people that I worry are being left behind. Left behind, insofar as they may one day visit a website that they've known and experienced one way for a long time, but all of a sudden, because of a site upgrade, they discover the user experience of the site has drastically changed. Maybe their browser is no longer supported, or their adaptive technology is not providing them with any useful information at all, rendering the site useless to them. If they cannot upgrade their systems for whatever reason, then what?

I'd like to thank Jennison (something I'm sure I'll be repeating numerous times over the next week!) for taking the time to share his reflections on accessibility.

Next time, we'll ask Jennison where he feels accessibility stands right now, and where it's headed in 2010 and beyond.

Series Recap:

[Interview with Jennison Asuncion – part one](#)

[Interview with Jennison Asuncion – part two](#)

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2 Responses to “Interview with Jennison Asuncion”

1.  [Ross Monaghan](#) says:
[February 14, 2010 at 7:31 pm](#)

Great stuff Steve! Nothing like good honest feedback from the someone who lives it every day.

2.  [Jim Franklin](#) says:
[April 20, 2010 at 12:56 pm](#)

I was looking at the site above and located a really good website named FreedomDisability.com that can really help you if you are disabled. This domain has really good information that can assist people with disabilities who live in the United States apply for Social Security Disability Insurance Benefits and win. This website offers a lot of great tips and information where you can get free information on how to successfully apply for and win Disability Insurance with the Social Security Administration (SSA).

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Steve Grobschmidt is a User Experience Lead with over twelve years in the web industry. He is on a mission to ensure that user experience, especially accessibility, is foremost in the creation of great products.

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Interview with Jennison Asuncion, continued

February 15th, 2010 by Steve | Filed under [Accessibility Interview](#).

This is part two of my three-part series sharing my recent email interview with Jennison Asuncion. If you missed it, check out part one, “[Interview with Jennison Asuncion](#).” Today, we talk about the state of web accessibility in North America, and the prognosis for the future.

Steve (SG): What do you think the state of web accessibility in North America is right now? How would you grade the progress made thus far?

Jennison (JA): I would say web accessibility is in a pretty dynamic state right now, pardon the pun. The release in December 2008 of the much needed version 2 of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, along with other work by the W3C’s Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) in where they are finalizing guidance on how to make dynamic content using AJAX and other technologies accessible via [Accessible Rich Internet Applications](#) (ARIA) is getting us to a better place when it comes to having a set of specifications to help broadly address Web 2.0 and accessibility.

In addition, companies are pushing out toolkits and libraries that contain accessible widgets and components that developers can use, such as IBM’s work on [Dojo Dijits](#) and Adobe’s work on [Flex](#). There’s an excellent piece done by [The Paciello Group](#) identifying a number of accessible JavaScript UI Libraries.

And definitely not to be overlooked are the ongoing efforts of organizations such as: Mozilla, the Adaptive Technology Resource Centre (ATRC) here in Toronto, and Drupal, which are active communities making significant contributions to improving the state of web accessibility

People are increasing in both their appreciation for the importance of accessibility, and in their knowledge of how to code in an accessible way. This is thanks, in no small part, to dedicated organizations such as: [WebAIM](#), the [Illinois Center for Information Technology Accessibility](#), [Equal Access to Software and Information](#) (EASI), and [Knowbility](#), each of whom provide accessibility resources, training, and in some cases tools, to the web community at large.

In fact, WebAIM and ICITA have developed free tools that folks can use, in part, to help test the accessibility of their websites. These include WebAIM’s [WAVE](#) and the [Functional Web Accessibility Evaluator](#) from the ICITA.

Admittedly, some of the effort driving web accessibility is being brought on thanks to legislative encouragement, such as the lawsuit involving Target.com, and the upcoming introduction of the Information and Communication Standard of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). On the flip-side, I am always coming across developers who are genuinely wanting to make



web experiences as accessible as possible. Dennis Lembree is one example of someone who saw gaps in the popular Twitter app, and decided to build [Accessible Twitter](#).

I'm seeing a new business case being built and used, linking how developing sites to be accessible benefits not only users with disabilities, but also those using mobile devices to access the web, older-aged users, as well as search engine optimization. This positioning of increased benefits for the larger population, to me, can only help build the web accessibility value proposition in a more tangible way for those looking at the bottom line who still need convincing.

Through e-mail discussion lists and social media, I'm seeing an increase in the level of constructive conversations on web accessibility among and between the developer, the IT accessibility professional, and the end-user with disabilities communities taking place. Some of these conversations, I'll say, are long overdue, but at least they are happening.

Finally, I've been fortunate enough to be exposed to a thriving and active research community where some of the brightest minds are trying to solve web and mobile accessibility challenges by building software and hardware solutions of all kinds. Jeffrey Bigham's [WebAnywhere](#) – a browser-based screen reader, is just one example. If the opportunity presents itself, I encourage readers to attend an [Assets](#) or a [W4A](#) conference. There are others out there too, where there is a heavy emphasis on research-driven work.

Is it all a good news story? While the number of people who know about web accessibility or what needs to be done to make sites and applications accessible is on the rise, websites and applications are launched daily, for whatever reason, with little to no consideration for accessibility.

There are still common misperceptions out there such as: people with disabilities don't use the web; adding alt text to images is all that is needed to make a site accessible; the only web users with disabilities needing consideration are blind JAWS screen reader users; accessibility can be dealt with at the end of development or in a "next" release; or making a site accessible will: take too much time, cost too much, and impact creativity.

The W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative is certainly doing work around outreach and education. However, I still hear people lament about how looking at the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) V2.0 documentation is overwhelming, when all they want and have the time for is a handy list of what is required to make a site accessible.

Development tools, frameworks, and technologies are constantly changing, and these are being released at lightning speed. To further complicate matters, while technology vendors may make available accessible widgets, the reality is, developers may want or need to customize them or use others that are not accessible because they work better based on client requirements. Or, they may choose to build their own components altogether. Each of these situations will have an impact on how accessible the final end-product will be. Add to the mix the fact that many adaptive technologies, such as screen readers, screen magnification, and dictation software that some users with disabilities need in order to interact with the web are just not keeping up to pace when it comes to being able to work with the latest and greatest in rich internet technologies.

Involving users with disabilities in testing throughout the development lifecycle and/or using different combinations of browsers and adaptive software during testing, is still not commonplace. This is key, especially since much of the accessibility of rich internet applications rests on how techniques, controls, and technology are being implemented. This can only be validated through testing, and who better to test than the typical end-users themselves.

SG: Where do you see accessibility heading in 2010, and beyond?

JA: I'll answer the question by saying where I'd like to see accessibility head in 2010 and beyond. We need many more real-world examples of websites and applications in the mainstream, as points of reference, which showcase how to use the latest and greatest widgets and technology in an accessible way. To be truly useful, these need to include not only sites that contain textbook perfect implementations, but also others that have varying levels of complexity that call for some level of thinking outside-of-the-box in order to make the site accessible.

We need to redouble our efforts around education and outreach, where the focus shifts from what is seen by some as preaching and prescriptive, to practical, hands-on, useful information using language that devs and others speak. This is especially critical given the emphasis today on initiatives like Government and health 2.0, and the mobile web, who knows what's next.

I am excited by the emerging grassroots efforts to explore adopting the unconference model to educate and communicate with the development community on IT accessibility. This is just one way, and there are certainly other methods out there, such as exploiting [YouTube](#).

I am worried that if we do not put a focus on education, that developers, in the absence of information they can use immediately, will go ahead and implement accessibility the best way they know how, potentially incorrectly, which will only lead to inconsistencies across the board.

At the same time, we also need to make it easy for people to make things accessible. This is especially true in our world of user generated content, where Grandma Sue could be posting a video. If adding captions requires a degree in Computer Science, she won't do it.

The vendor community of screen reader, screen magnification, voice recognition and other adaptive technologies needs to be more visible and active in the ongoing accessibility conversations that are happening real-time. They need to be faster to market, and the technology needs to be compatible with what is being pushed out today, so that someone with a disability isn't waiting for a new version of product X in order for them to use all of the features and functionality of a website that launched yesterday.

As an IT accessibility professional who happens to be blind, I would like to see more people with disabilities get involved in the field of web accessibility in the years to come. As a profession, there is absolutely a need for more people with disabilities working at the testing and coding level. However, we also need more people with disabilities at the tables where business, thought, policy, and IT conversations are taking place that will shape where the web will be headed in the years to come.

In the final installment of this interview, Jennison will give advice on how to deal with obstacles that the business world may put up in one's quest to make web sites more accessible. I'll also share some final thoughts about this outstanding experience.

Stay tuned!

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Interview with Jennison Asuncion, wrap-up

February 18th, 2010 by Steve | Filed under [Accessibility Interview](#).

Today, I wrap up what really has been an insightful interview with Jennison Asuncion. Check out [Interview with Jennison Asuncion](#) and [Interview with Jennison Asuncion, continued](#) if you haven't already.

We're down to the last question, about how to tackle web accessibility with less-than-receptive audiences.

Steve (SG): When people getting into web accessibility advocacy are met with obstacles such as businesses or cultures who do not “get it” or see its value, what advice would you give them?

Jennison (JA): The advice I would give someone would be similar to the advice I would give for any advocacy effort. Absolutely my first piece of advice would be to listen. Listen to understand what possible constraints and/or lack of knowledge may exist that is resulting in a business or culture not “getting it.” I truly believe no one sets out to build a website or application with the express intention to exclude anyone. That said, if, for example, a client does not explicitly state and fund accessibility as a requirement, a development shop cannot be expected to slip accessibility in just because it's the right thing to do. In this case, the complaint and/or issue rests with the client not with the developer.



The other advice I would give, and again, it can be applied to any issue, is to keep the tone respectful throughout, as much as possible. While I mentioned earlier that I am seeing constructive conversations happening among and between the communities of developers, accessibility champions and end-users with disabilities, I have certainly seen a few not so constructive conversations on all sides. It's obvious that none of this advances the cause at all. Of course it goes without saying that if you are being ignored or are just not getting anywhere, you may need to take a different approach, but I would hope that would be the exception and not the rule.

On a more practical level, when discussing web accessibility problems, as an end-user, don't assume that the first person you communicate with will be highly technical and/or will know what you are talking about. I would highly recommend reading [Contacting Organizations about Inaccessible Websites](#), which is I believe in draft stage. However, it is a document from the W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative, and provides practical steps and templates on how to address the topic of web site inaccessibility.

I want to thank, for a final time, Jennison for taking the time to put together such extensive, articulate answers. He obviously put a great deal of thought and attention into them, and as you can see, he has a wealth of information from several different vantage points — from working in the business sector, education sector, and having a visual disability.

For anyone, like myself, who is taking on web accessibility and trying to wrap their head around where to go for information, how to advocate it effectively, etcetera, Jennison provided a lot of direction. He shared a ton of organizations and web sites that are great places to go for information, consultation and all-around insight.

I have to share that it wasn't until many months after following Jennison and conversing on Twitter that I even realized that he is blind. At first, I felt bad I didn't catch that, that I wasn't paying close enough attention. Then it hit me as he, again, worded it as being a web user who "happens to be blind".

Jennison doesn't beat you over the head with his disability. He's a person who utilizes web sites like all of us do. He wants to access the same social media sites, the same information sites, the same transaction sites as any of us. Having or not having a disability makes you who you are, but at the same time it isn't some bright, blinking badge on your shirt.

It's the same thought that occurred to me as I became familiar with the [AbleGamers](#) organization, whom I recently interviewed and will be sharing next week. One of my favorite hobbies is video games. If, today, I lost my hearing or lost my sight, that wouldn't automatically make my love for games go away. I'd then become a disabled video game enthusiast, and I'd want as much the same experience as before, as close as possible.

In closing, I'm very grateful that Twitter and my growing place in web accessibility has enabled me to meet people like Jennison Asuncion. I'm hoping to meet more people, attend accessibility conferences and unconferences, and learn from it all.

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