

Book Reviews

Universal Designs for Web Applications

by Wendy Chisholm and Matt May

O'Reilly, Nov 2008. 179pp pbk £24.99

This is as user-friendly as one expects from O'Reilly. The authors are authoritative, interested in promulgating the best but realising that in reality one encounters a whole host of pitfalls. Their enthusiasm for good websites and the opportunities offered by developments in technology shines through. 'Universal design' is defined as making Web content work as efficiently as possible across the range of capabilities exhibited by both people and their chosen browsing technologies, with the goal of increasing usability for people with disabilities and in scenarios involving mobile and embedded devices, while avoiding the need to build an interface for every kind of browser.

The book says it is intended for:

- Web developers looking to build universal design practices into their work
- Managers and trainers looking to help their organisation do the same
- Accessibility advocates looking for advice relevant to modern web design practices
- Anyone with web development or design skills who needs a refresher.

I would say it achieves its intention, as a reference book focussed on the process of design. It is not a tutorial on how to claim conformance to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, but imparts understanding of the elements of WCAG and their purpose.

To get the most from this book readers should be familiar with Web page technology, particularly (X)HTML and CSS, but there are over 30 useful pages on the importance of accessible and universal design, on Web standards available to guide the developer, and on the importance of metadata, which are a readable introduction to the principles without techy jargon. Examples and statistics are included; there are references to follow up if you want more depth or detail.

Other chapters give readable and pithy guidance on structure and design, forms, tabular data, video and audio, scripting, the developing areas of Ajax and WAI-ARIA (Web Accessibility Initiative – Accessible Rich Internet Applications), rich Internet applications – Flash, Flex, Silverlight – and realistic tips on integrating universal design processes into the work flow of

an organisation of any size or type – you may need the patience of a saint if your organisation is bigger than a one-man-band! It emphasises that accessibility and universal design must be built in from the outset of a project to avoid extensive reworking of a product, site or application further down the line.

It warns against blindly accepting evaluation tools, briefly suggests criteria for selecting development tools and content management systems, and gives a list of some of the tools and resources available, including websites offering videos of people using screen readers and Blackberry simulators.

There is a list of 20 questions to help the reader gauge whether a site follows the principles of universal design; tools are listed for each question that will help explore the site to find the answer. Suggested tests include trying a site with the mouse unplugged, or using a screen reader with the monitor turned off, for instance – and this is for the most basic level of accessibility.

It is possible that if you are a professional reader of technical manuals that you will find it frustrating not to have all the information within the covers, but if you have dabbled a bit and feel universal design is important for disseminating information inclusively you may welcome the opportunity of a page-turner overview with invitations to follow further threads online.

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