[music playing]

[Narelle] Hi. Welcome to

The Digital Access Show.

I'm Narelle Wright,

and this week we're

talking about a topic that's…

part of digital accessibility,

but it's a topic that,

it's a problem that

I experience daily,

sometimes hourly,

and that's documents

that are not accessible.

And I want to just start

talking about it in this way.

I recently had to

fill out some forms

to get two different

quotes for insurance.

Both of them were PDF

forms, two different companies.

And I was,

you know, this is

accessible. I can do this.

I got to the first

page, filled it out.

I thought, oh, gotta look

up this piece of information.

Found the information.

Don't forget,

I'm a screen reader user.

I don't have much sight,

so my computers set up for me.

And I went back to the form

and I had to start at

the first page again.

and use the arrow keys

and the tab buttons…

to get back to where I was.

After about two pages of that,

I gave up.

So, the other company did

something slightly different.

I explained the problem,

and they said,

okay, let's see if we can dump

the form out in Microsoft Word,

because we're pretty sure the

form's not accessible for you.

Came back to me, we can,

we've sent that to you,

fill it out in that.

We will transfer the

information across,

and then sign it.

They were the ones

that got the quote,

or got the business.

Now to discuss this further,

I've brought along the General

Manager of Meet Aandi, Alex Bay.

Alex, thank you so

much for coming on,

and talking about this with me.

[Alex] My pleasure, Narelle.

Thank you for having me.

[Narelle] Alex, you're

an expert in this area.

That's your passion.

It's what you do.

Is the experience that I

have and commonly have,

is it normal?

[Alex] I wouldn't

want to call it normal,

but it is certainly common.

It shouldn't be

normal, but there…

The reality is that the

majority of documents…

are produced by sighted

users for sighted users.

And so, the…

concept of a PDF,

with the P standing for print,

document being set up for

not print isn't necessarily…

always carried over,

but I guess to

be a little bit glib,

that's why I have a job.

So, I'm not…

I like to tell people

that I would love…

to educate myself out of a job,

because I will gladly go

and do something else,

but the need for making documents

accessible is still there,

so here I am.

[Narelle] Alex, can you tell us

about yourself and your work?

[Alex] Sure. So,

like you mentioned,

Narelle, my name is Alex Bey.

I have been working…

in document accessibility

going on 10 years now.

And I do,

I am, I guess,

fortunate enough to say that

I don't have any significant…

disability that impairs

my day-to-day working,

but I do have a number

of family members

that do have lived

experience of both physical

and intellectual disability.

And growing up with…

members of the family

that had different difficulties,

and just being used

to catering for that,

it became a normal part of life.

And then you step outside

of the home environment,

and see that the rest of the

world isn't set up the way that…

your house is and

your family's houses are.

And it just doesn't

make sense why…

we wouldn't be

catering for everyone.

And especially,

I do have a marketing and

a psychology background.

So initially I'm looking at,

you know, human behaviour.

Why do people do

the things that they do…

partially so that you

can sell them things.

But…

Again, like having,

items that aren't accessible,

having advertising

that isn't accessible…

means that you're losing a

whole portion of the market.

And so, how I ended up

where I am was going from,

you know, having this passion,

and this understanding that the

world should be more accessible,

and then having the

opportunity to guide…

clients, guide businesses,

guide government on…

how they can deliver

their information in a way

that more people will access,

which results in more users

and in the private space,

more money.

It's a silly thing not to do.

So, that's sort of my mantra.

[Narelle] So, what you're saying,

my experience is not uncommon.

It's not normal.

[Alex] Unfortunately not. No.

[Narelle] Yeah.

People will say, yeah, but

that's because you can't see.

And that's why it

was a problem for you,

and you should expect that.

My answer always is, yeah, but,

you know, I don't want everyone

to know my private business,

number one.

But what about other

people's disabilities,

intellectual impairments,

cognitive, others?

Do you know of similar

problems that they have,

in dealing with documents?

[Alex] Yes. So,

documents in particular…

can certainly be problematic.

Even looking at

something basic, like,

if you are missing navigation

links on a table of contents.

As a screen reader user,

you are potentially

having to tab page by page,

or hoping that you

can find the go-to page,

and you can read through

the table of contents

to find the page

number that you want.

But if the document has

covers or divider pages

that result in page 12 not being

the same thing as the 12th page,

then that can

cause a lot of issue.

But if you likewise have

a physical impairment,

maybe you can't use a

traditional mouse and keyboard.

If you're trying to

use a pointing device

or voice recognition to

get to that same 12th page,

which is still not page 12,

then that exact

same issue occurs.

Or if you needed to

manually move to page 200,

but you're relying on limited

mobility to hit that page down,

you're not hitting it 200 times.

In the same way, if we're

looking at intellectual,

if you've written a document that

has a high level of language,

having to go somewhere

else to get that information,

we can't really,

I guess, highlight an existing

document and simplify it,

or keyword search in the

same way that you can on web.

So, really the biggest…

overarching problem in documents

is versatility and choice.

They are what they are,

and people are quite reluctant

to make them anything else,

when there certainly is a lot

of opportunity for them to be…

something else and

to be more accessible.

[Narelle] So,

why don't people do it?

[Alex] It's something

else to do.

So, the biggest

answer that I get is,

I didn't know it

wasn't accessible,

or I assumed it was fine, or…

Yeah, just a lack of

understanding or awareness.

And…

if you don't have accessibility

in mind to begin with,

then the amount of work required

to go back and remediate,

which is the general industry

term, an existing document,

is quite time consuming

and can be quite expensive.

The larger your document

is, the more work is involved.

But if you do keep it in

mind from the beginning,

then it becomes

part of your workflow,

and it's not an additional cost.

It's not an additional

amount of time.

And so, organisations who do it

well do it from the beginning.

Organisations that wait

until the end will often keep…

kicking the ball down the line,

and then end up with

a larger amount of work

that then becomes

more and more daunting.

[Narelle] Yeah.

So, really what you're

saying is it can be done.

Is it easy to do?

[Alex] I would say yes.

Not many other people

would agree with me

It's…

It's a process and it does

require a level of understanding,

but the semantics of the

structure is fairly simple.

A sighted user could

look at a paragraph of text,

and know that it is

a paragraph of text.

Or they would

know what a list is.

They know what a table is,

they know what a heading is.

And so,

in a simple format of…

identifying what

that information is,

in the tagging process

of making a heading

to be understood as a heading,

that part of it is quite

simple and straightforward.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Alex] What is more

difficult is where…

information relies purely on

visual to be able to represent.

So if you've got a,

what I call a choose

your own adventure graph.

So, are you X, Y, Z?

If yes, go over here.

If no, go somewhere else.

That becomes more difficult,

because a screen reader's

experience of a document,

or a website, is quite linear,

regardless of the design.

And so, if you start

putting forks in the road,

or you start relying on

people to make a choice

in order to get where

they need to go,

that takes a little

bit more work,

because it isn't following

that linear structure.

But if your document is linear,

there is no real barrier

to making it accessible,

other than that you

just have to do it.

[Narelle] Yeah.

One of the things that

I've always thought,

and coming from a

computing background,

coder and all this

work I've done,

it's like anything,

you build it in at the start,

but it also should be just

standard operating procedure.

What are your thoughts?

[Alex] Absolutely. I think that…

It should be part of

how people do things.

So, if we look at

Word, for example,

the heading structure

exists in Word.

When you type in

a URL, for example,

it is automatically hyperlinked.

You're not going to

manually draw a table in Word.

You're going to use

the table function.

And so,

most of how Word is

utilised is natively accessible

as long as you use the
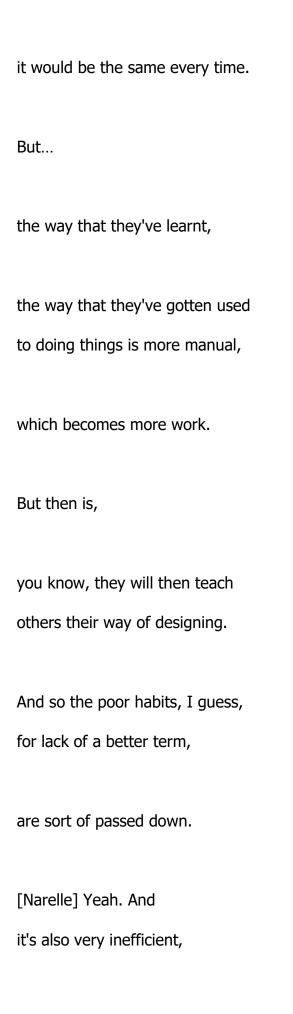
components that are there.

When you move into InDesign,

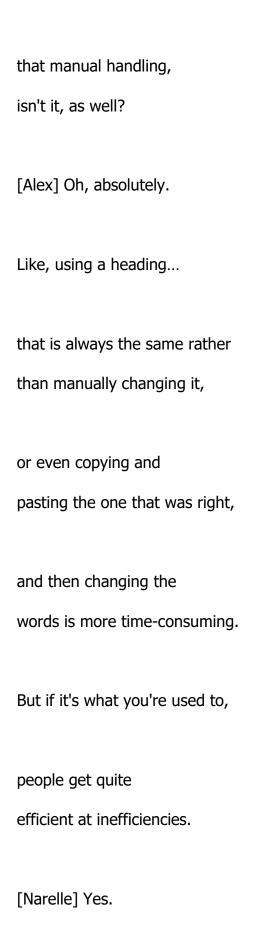I know a lot of designers

who do manually draw tables.
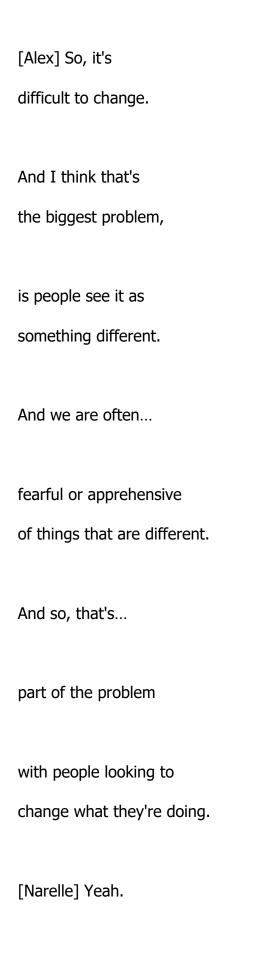
I know designers who

manually change the size

and weight of text every time,

rather than having

a heading structure.

And if they used headings,

it would be the same every time.

But...

the way that they've learnt,

the way that they've gotten used

to doing things is more manual,

which becomes more work.

But then is,

you know, they will then teach

others their way of designing.

And so the poor habits, I guess,

for lack of a better term,

are sort of passed down.

[Narelle] Yeah. And

it's also very inefficient,

that manual handling,

isn't it, as well?

[Alex] Oh, absolutely.

Like, using a heading…

that is always the same rather

than manually changing it,

or even copying and

pasting the one that was right,

and then changing the

words is more time-consuming.

But if it's what you're used to,

people get quite

efficient at inefficiencies.

[Narelle] Yes.

[Alex] So, it's

difficult to change.

And I think that's

the biggest problem,

is people see it as

something different.

And we are often…

fearful or apprehensive

of things that are different.

And so, that's…

part of the problem

with people looking to

change what they're doing.

[Narelle] Yeah.

So when you're

talking Microsoft Word,

when you're talking PDF,

like your Google Docs,

LibreOffice, all those different

versions of document writers.

do they all have

accessibility built in,

that it can be done easily?

[Alex] To varying degrees, yes.

Google Docs was actually a bit

slow off the mark for a while.

You had to specifically go

in in and turn accessibility on,

rather than it natively being

accessible from the get-go.

And it was missing things

that are a little more…

complex, things like…

assigning heading

structures within tables,

so that you didn't just hear

that a piece of data was
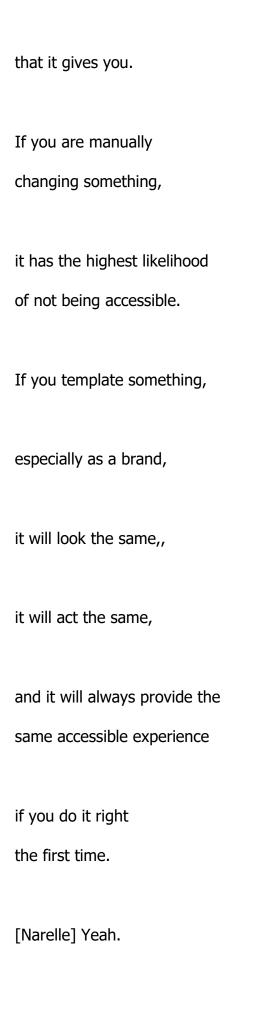
in row 23, in column five.

It actually told you
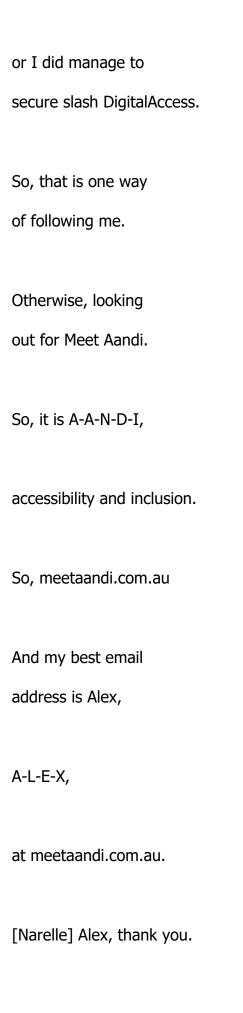
what the headings were.

But for the most part,

the structure of

headings, lists, tables, links…

are all the same

across all formats.

So, a heading in Word

becomes a heading in PDF,

the same as a heading in HTML.

Screen readers are designed to

understand that type of markup.

So, most formats will use

that same markup to carry over.

And that's also where

some problems come in,

is if people make a new format,

then it's not the same

as the default format

that is understood

by everything else,

and then gets ignored or missed.

[Narelle] Yeah.

Alex, do you have any tips,

takeaway pieces of

advice that you could give

to the listeners about

documents and accessibility?

[Alex] Probably template

as much as you can.

Try to use, if you've

got a Word template,

use all of the components

that it gives you.

If you are manually

changing something,

it has the highest likelihood

of not being accessible.

If you template something,

especially as a brand,

it will look the same,,

it will act the same,

and it will always provide the

same accessible experience

if you do it right

the first time.

[Narelle] Yeah.

That's a good piece of advice.

Alex, how can people

keep in contact with you

if they want to find out

more about your work,

talk to you about

accessibility of documentation?

What's the best way?

[Alex] So, you can

follow what we are doing,

or specifically what

I'm doing on LinkedIn.

So, you will be able to

find me under Alex Bey,

or I did manage to

secure slash DigitalAccess.

So, that is one way

of following me.

Otherwise, looking

out for Meet Aandi.

So, it is A-A-N-D-I,

accessibility and inclusion.

So, meetaandi.com.au

And my best email

address is Alex,

A-L-E-X,

at meetaandi.com.au.

[Narelle] Alex, thank you.

Thanks for coming on. It's been…

I actually like the way you

talk about the templates,

because it's something

I talk about as well,

and say the same thing.

Template it.

It makes more efficient

use of your time,

more productive

use of your time.

And it ensures accessibility.

So, thanks again for coming on.

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The Digital Access Show,

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We really love feedback,

even the ugly feedback.

And we'll see you next time

on The Digital Access Show.

See you then.

[music playing]