

# Digital Access Show – Matthew Horspool Transcript

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## Introduction

### **Mark Muscat:**

Hello everyone and welcome to The Digital Access Show. This podcast is produced by Digital Access Solutions and the Assistive Technology Group.

Narelle normally hosts these episodes, but today you have me. My name is Mark Muscat and I am part of the team at DASAT.

Today we are recording in London, which is quite a long way from our home base in Australia. Joining us is Matthew Horspool, who will introduce himself and tell us a little about the work he does.

Matthew, thanks for joining us.

### **Matthew Horspool:**

No worries. Thank you very much for having me and for travelling all this way to record a podcast episode.

### **Mark Muscat:**

It is our pleasure.

## Matthew's Background

### **Matthew Horspool:**

My name is Matthew Horspool. I live in Coventry, which is about an hour from London by train.

I sing in the choir at Coventry Cathedral, but my day job is working in assistive technology training and consultancy. Most of my work happens in workplace environments.

I spend a lot of time helping people use JAWS screen reader software and braille displays. Occasionally I also work with braille embossers.

Often this work connects with tools like Microsoft Teams, SharePoint and Salesforce. By the time most people come to me they already know something about JAWS. What they need help with is making it work well with specific workplace systems.

## Digital Accessibility in the United Kingdom

### **Mark Muscat:**

You mentioned that you mainly work with people who have low vision or who are blind. From your perspective, what is digital accessibility like in the United Kingdom? Are there barriers or common challenges that you see?

### **Matthew Horspool:**

Honestly, I do not think the issues in the UK are very different from the issues in Australia.

One of the biggest gaps is education. Many people simply do not understand how blind people access computers or smartphones.

For example, when I am using my phone people sometimes ask how I am doing it. They assume I am using voice input software like Siri. In reality I am using VoiceOver, which reads information aloud and lets me navigate by tapping on the screen.

There is still a misunderstanding that blind people need software to speak to the computer. What we actually need is software that speaks to us.

## Understanding Accessibility Requirements

### **Matthew Horspool:**

Once people learn that screen readers can read information aloud, they often assume that the computer can automatically understand everything.

For example, someone might send a scanned image of a document and expect it to be readable.

But accessibility does not work that way. Documents need to contain proper text. They need headings, structure and clear formatting. That is part of the education process for workplaces.

There is also an education gap for blind users themselves.

Some people who are blind from birth have used specialised braille note takers through school. When they reach university or start work, it may be the first time they are using a laptop.

Skills like touch typing are extremely important, but they are not always taught or reinforced strongly enough.

## The Role of Workplace Assessments

### **Mark Muscat:**

Assessments are critical when someone needs technology for employment. Do you think assessors also need more education about assistive technology?

### **Matthew Horspool:**

Education is definitely part of the answer. But another important piece is making sure the right assessor is involved.

Blindness is actually a low incidence disability when compared with other workplace adjustments. Assessors might regularly deal with mobility impairments, dyslexia or autism, but they might only see a blind user occasionally.

Because technology changes quickly, it is difficult for someone who rarely works in that area to stay up to date.

A better approach would be to direct blind users to specialist assessors who understand visual impairment technology. That would lead to better recommendations and better outcomes.

## Accessibility of Websites and Apps

### **Mark Muscat:**

Let us talk about websites and apps. How accessible are government services and local council websites in the UK?

### **Matthew Horspool:**

There is legislation and guidance in place to improve accessibility in the public sector. Government services and local councils are expected to meet accessibility standards.

Overall, that has helped. Many systems now provide enough information for screen readers to interpret them.

However, accessibility is not only about technical compliance. Sometimes something is technically accessible but not very usable.

For example, a screen reader might read large amounts of information when a simpler layout would be more efficient. Or a user may need to press the tab key many times just to reach an important button.

So the system works, but it is slow and inefficient for blind users.

## Educating Developers

### **Mark Muscat:**

So part of the challenge is helping developers understand how screen readers work and how people use them.

### **Matthew Horspool:**

Exactly. Developers also need to understand what screen reader users already expect.

For example, sometimes a button is labelled "Mute Button". When the screen reader reads it, the result becomes "Mute Button Button". The screen reader already knows it is a button, so that extra word is unnecessary.

The same happens with images. A description might start with the sentence "This is a picture showing...". That is not needed because the screen reader has already told us that it is an image.

Simple things like this can make the experience smoother and more efficient.

## Online Grocery Shopping and Consumer Services

### **Mark Muscat:**

We were talking earlier about grocery shopping. How accessible are consumer services like online shopping in the UK?

### **Matthew Horspool:**

Overall it is reasonably good. Society recognises that services like grocery delivery are very important for vulnerable people, including disabled people.

During the COVID pandemic, delivery slots were extremely limited. Some supermarkets, like Tesco, created priority booking slots for elderly and disabled customers. That recognition was helpful.

Most of the apps are technically accessible. The challenge is again about efficiency.

For example, when I shop using my phone and a screen reader, something that could take one or two swipes may require five or six swipes because too much information is presented.

Companies are trying to help, but sometimes they guess what blind users need rather than asking us directly.

Another challenge is feedback. If you report an issue to customer support, the information does not always reach the developers who can fix it.

## Advice for Developers

### **Mark Muscat:**

Before we finish, what advice would you give to developers who want to make their websites or applications more accessible?

### **Matthew Horspool:**

The most important thing is to focus on exposing information properly to assistive technology.

Use standard controls whenever possible. For example, use standard HTML form fields, buttons and lists. Make sure they are labelled correctly.

If developers use standard controls and proper labels, assistive technology already knows how to interact with them.

In many cases you do not need to invent complicated solutions. Just provide clear structure and let the assistive technology do its job.

## Closing

### **Mark Muscat:**

That is very practical advice. Thank you, Matthew, for joining us on the podcast today.

We are here in London, surrounded by pigeons as you might expect. You live in Coventry. Is it very different there?

### **Matthew Horspool:**

I enjoy coming to London and I work here quite often. But yes, there are definitely fewer pigeons in Coventry.

### **Mark Muscat:**

That is good to know.

I would also like to thank Elise Smithwick, who has been behind the camera recording this episode.

Thank you for joining us and we look forward to seeing you in the next episode of The Digital Access Show.

## Outro

### **Narelle:**

If you enjoy what we do, please share, review, like and subscribe.

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We would also love to hear your feedback.

See you next time on The Digital Access Show.

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