

The Digital Access Show Transcript

Episode: Sonia Tremblay

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Introduction and why accessibility matters

Narelle: Hi, and welcome to today's episode of The Digital Access Show. Today's guest is someone I met last year. Sonia runs a company called Hands On VA Services, and I met Sonia via Vanessa Norman. Sonia, thank you so much for coming on.

Sonia: No worries. Thanks so much for having me.

Narelle: Oh, I'm so sorry.

Sonia: That's okay.

Narelle: The reason you're on, Sonia, is that when we first spoke about digital accessibility, you didn't know what it was. Then about a week later, you called and said, "We need to learn this. My team needs to learn this." Tell us about what you do and why you needed to learn about the digital accessibility standard.

Sonia: Yes, for sure. We create systems for entrepreneurs. We use a platform called Go High Level, and since I've met you, we also use WordPress so we can ensure we create websites that are compliant for people with disability and for people who need to navigate the online world to find the services they need. I reached out to you because you've been coding for a long time yourself, so you know exactly what is needed. You have a world of experience, so you were the best person for me to learn from. As soon as you made me aware of what I didn't know, I realised that a lot of people who build websites are simply not aware. This is a very special message for us to be able to share with the world—how to build websites that are compliant.

Building accessible websites in practice

Narelle: Are people asking you to develop compliant websites?

Sonia: Not usually, but from now on I tell them about it. I ask, “Do you know about it?” and make them aware. Everyone says, “I didn’t know about it.” It’s simple things—like using H1, H2 and H3 headings properly, or making sure a button doesn’t just say “Join now” without context. Every time I create a link now, I make sure the person already knows where that button is going to lead them. That’s super important to me.

Narelle: You’ve got a number of people who work for you. What was their response when you said, “We’re going to learn this”?

Sonia: They were very excited. They thought, “This is great—we’ll learn something new.” It can really help people in society, and it was something we simply were not aware of before. It was a no-brainer to develop that awareness and a new way of building websites. For example, a lot of people put pictures on websites but don’t describe them properly. To really make sure it describes what the picture is means a person can actually understand what that image is.

Narelle: All your team are based overseas, right? What about in the countries where they come from? Does this standard equally apply there?

Sonia: That’s a very good question. Now that we all have this awareness, we all feel we need to talk about it with others as well. We were all blown away that a simple tool we’re now using can make such a difference in someone else’s life. I really wanted to make sure the message passed on to people that the little time you take to ensure your H1, H2 and H3 headings are done properly, and that you use a readable font, is so important.

Narelle: I’m blown away because I know the standard is applied in India, Pakistan and the Philippines, which are the three areas your staff are based in. But what really blows me away is that you updated all your procedures and policies so that accessibility is built in, haven’t you?

Sonia: Yes. This is the way we go on. All my emails are formatted in Open Sans 16 as well, and this is what I suggest to all my clients. If they choose not to do it, that’s their choice, but I always bring them into the awareness of what they should do.

Narelle: What has been the response from clients when they've seen websites that are really accessible? Can they tell the difference?

Sonia: I don't think people can necessarily tell the difference. For me, my website looks similar to before; the font is just a little different. We also want to make sure images are not too flashy or disturbing. Done this way, it looks nice and clean. A lot of my clients simply didn't know about accessibility before.

Training, languages and applying the framework

Narelle: When we were preparing to start the training, I remember saying that some of this would be quite technical. We talked about the best way to approach that for people whose first language is not English, and one thing we did was make space for translation where needed. Is that practical on a website as well—if you need a site in two or three different languages, do you build separate websites or different ways of viewing the same information?

Sonia: For my own business, I do French and English, so I have two separate websites. That's the way I want it to be. I've got a French website and an English website, but the formatting stays the same. The frame is the same. In the training, we learned that the framing needs to be adapted everywhere, no matter what the language is or what the colours are. The content can change, but the frame stays the same.

Narelle: I really enjoyed working with your team because they were genuinely interested in learning. As we went through the four principles, they were able to adapt it into their work straight away. Has that flowed through into other areas of your work as well?

Sonia: Yes, definitely. It's an additional skill that is now part of what we do.

Narelle: What was the hardest thing to implement?

Sonia: You explain the “why” so well that once people understand why they are doing it, the “what” and the “how” become easier to digest. Understanding why we are doing this makes it much easier to implement.

Narelle: The “why” is really important. An example I use is when I received a bill that I couldn’t read properly. I knew who it came from, but I couldn’t work out when it was due, the amount, or whether it was even calculated correctly. I had to wait for someone else to read it to me. For me, the “why” is about accessing information. For you, if I can clarify, the “why” is to ensure your clients reach the people they want to serve, isn’t it?

Sonia: Yes, and that it’s accessible to everyone. My clients have a mission—to share their coaching, products or services—but if not everyone can read it or see it, they could be missing out on an amazing client, and the client could be missing out on something they really need.

International clients and accessibility standards

Narelle: One of the things I’m very interested in is whether you create websites for companies overseas.

Sonia: Yes, I’ve got clients from the USA, France, London, Canada and Australia. Some things can be different, such as GDPR in Europe, but making sure buttons explain where a person goes when they click is international.

Narelle: That’s the thing, isn’t it? With the laws coming in around accessibility, doing what you’ve done means your overseas clients selling into Europe are already in a much better position because the websites are set up accessibly.

Sonia: Yes—and it’s not just websites. It’s also PDFs and Word documents.

Narelle: What about your US clients? There’s been a lot happening around accessibility in the United States. What were your US clients saying?

Sonia: I didn't go into any of the legal side of it. I can only do the best I can, and I can only share what I've learned from you. I inform people as best I can, but I don't get into the legal part.

Narelle: That's fair. One of the reasons I wanted you on is that we're talking this year to people from different countries and backgrounds about their experiences. You've already told us that the website framework is universal, and I love that.

Sonia: We do the best we can with what we know. Every time we do something, we try to be mindful of the awareness we now have. Are we perfect? No. But every day we try to get better and better, and to tell people about it as well.

Cost, advice and final takeaway

Narelle: Does it add much cost to a website to include digital accessibility?

Sonia: No, it doesn't. The first few levels are not very hard. It doesn't take much time to add a proper name or description to a photo, or to make sure buttons and links are named properly. These are the basics, but if you do the basics well, that is already a huge help for people who experience difficulty accessing content.

Narelle: What advice would you give to other web developers in relation to digital accessibility and what you've learned?

Sonia: Learn from the source and get proper training. We don't know what we don't know until we know it. When I don't know something, I like to go directly to the source and learn properly. We spent five days in training, two to three hours a day, and we learned so much. We now understand how we can contribute through what we do by being more attentive to details that could easily be overlooked. Once you understand how those details impact people, you take the time to do it.

Narelle: So really, to make the biggest impact: attend to detail and get the training. How can people get in contact with you?

Sonia: People can reach me through my website, Hands On VA Services. There's a discovery call link on the website where they can book a call, and we can discuss how we can support them and help them take their vision to systems.

Narelle: Thanks, Sonia. It was so much fun working with you and your team. Sonia took the time to do the training, and that's important. As Sonia says—and as our theme this week says—you don't know what you don't know. That applies to all of us. If we take the time to learn and apply what we learn, everyone benefits. If you like what we do, please like, share and subscribe. Send us a review—we'd love it. We'll see you next week on The Digital Access Show. Have a great week.

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