



BARRIERS TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | APRIL 2023

Digital access barriers for Americans who are blind, have low vision, or are deafblind.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) established four overarching goals for people with disabilities: equal opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency. In the 21st century, all people with disabilities must have full access to the digital environment in order to achieve these goals.

People with a wide range of sensory, physical, and cognitive disabilities face significant barriers to accessing digital information and services. AFB conducted the Barriers to Digital Inclusion Survey (BDIS) in November-December of 2022 to specifically investigate the barriers faced by Americans who are blind, have low vision, or are deafblind with websites, mobile apps, and video programming. Millions of people with other disabilities face additional barriers.

This report summarizes survey data from 398 participants who shared information about the daily tasks they perform using websites and mobile apps, how often they encounter barriers, and the impacts of those barriers as well as the barriers they encounter with video programming.

The results indicate that blind, low vision, and deafblind people, like sighted people, seek goods and services from businesses using websites and mobile apps.

However, they face pervasive challenges in the digital environment.

In the study, a majority of the participants reported facing access barriers at least some of the time while using websites and apps for important activities like shopping, applying for jobs, or interacting with schools. These access barriers limit independence, influence consumer decision making, and lead to frustration, exclusion, and lost productivity. Businesses, technology vendors, government agencies, schools, and service providers must make their websites and applications fully accessible to people with disabilities. Furthermore, the federal government must issue clear laws and regulations that make businesses, government agencies, and funding recipients accountable for the accessibility of the virtual environment through which they deliver their goods, services, programs, and activities. The recommendations in this report provide actionable steps that business leaders, policymakers, and computing educators can take to remove barriers and ensure full digital inclusion.

A photograph of a middle-aged man with a grey beard and sunglasses, wearing a dark blue turtleneck and a patterned tie. He is holding a smartphone in his right hand and a black voice recorder in his left hand, appearing to be recording or speaking into it. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a building.

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**BREAKING BARRIERS TO
DIGITAL INCLUSION**

BARRIER PREVALENCE

The nine tasks that presented the most common access barriers for individuals trying to use websites and mobile apps cover a wide spectrum of essential activities from travel and shopping to dating and education.

The percentages describe how many survey participants who have used websites or apps for a given task reported having at least occasional access issues.

1. Booking train or bus travel:
91% of website users, **87%** of app users
2. Booking air travel:
94% of website users, **85%** of app users
3. Ordering food:
88% of website users, **87%** of app users
4. Applying for jobs:
90% of website users, **80%** of app users
5. College coursework:
88% of website users, **84%** of app users
6. Accessing information from a child's school:
85% of website users, **87%** of app users
7. Online shopping:
86% of website users, **79%** of app users
8. Locating job opportunities:
86% of website users, **78%** of app users
9. Online dating:
82% of website users, **80%** of app users

Overall, 21% of participants said they dealt with access barriers on the Web at least once a day while 28% of participants said they dealt with an inaccessible app at least once a day.



44% of website users and 41% of mobile app users said they will switch to a different business for service if they encounter access barriers from a business's website or mobile app.

BREAKING BARRIERS TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

CONSEQUENCES OF BARRIERS

- When asked how they respond to access barriers, 44% of website users and 41% of mobile app users said they will switch to a different business for service if they encounter access barriers from a business's website or mobile app.
- When asked how digital access barriers impact their lives, 79% of website users and 78% of app users said they feel frustrated because they don't have as much independence as a sighted person when completing digital tasks.
- In response to the same question, 59% of website users and 63% of app users said they have less choice in which businesses to use for digital services compared to a sighted person because of access barriers.

OTHER FINDINGS

- When asked what specific access barriers occur most often, many participants described encounters with unlabeled buttons or other elements, as well as undescribed images, elements that do not interact with screen readers, and poor contrast or text being too small to read with low vision.
- About 60% of participants reported that television viewing platforms they use lack Audio Description (AD) and about half reported that menus on their televisions or streaming platforms are difficult to navigate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The federal government must issue and enforce clear laws and regulations that require websites and applications to be accessible. It should:

- Issue and vigorously enforce regulations under the Americans with Disabilities Act as well as Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requiring covered entities to make all of their websites and software applications accessible to customers, clients, and employees with disabilities.
- Provide covered entities with clear, free, and easily understood technical assistance that enables compliance with digital accessibility regulations and law.
- Pass the Websites and Software Applications Accessibility Act to modernize requirements for accessible technology, including requiring technology vendors to make their products accessible.

Businesses and organizations that use or make websites and applications should:

- Test for and adhere to the most recent standards for web and software accessibility.
- Hire website and software engineers, designers, and project managers who are knowledgeable about how people with disabilities use digital technologies and accessible and inclusive design practices.
- Institute internal accessibility policies (including procurement policies) to ensure that any web or app-based products that the organization buys, deploys, or sells are accessible to people with disabilities.
- Provide clear channels for clients with disabilities to offer feedback about accessibility and seek support when they are experiencing barriers.

Computing educators must incorporate accessibility knowledge and practices in technology design, engineering, and content creation training courses, including boot camps, corporate trainings, and academic computer science curricula.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Access to digital information is critical for full participation in a wide assortment of modern life activities. For people with disabilities, including those who are blind, have low vision, or are deafblind, digital access barriers limit equal opportunity, full participation, independence, and economic self-sufficiency. Policymakers, business leaders, and website and software developers must work together to remove barriers and foster full digital inclusion for all people with disabilities.