



Smallpdf

Accessible PDFs

**An Actionable Guide
for Every Business**

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Is Your Company Ready for the European Accessibility Act 2025?

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As of June 28, 2025, the European Accessibility Act will apply to private companies throughout the EU. Non-accessible PDFs can have legal consequences — including hefty fines.

The harsh truth: Two recent scientific studies show that **less than 20% of all PDFs meet even the most basic accessibility criteria**. Our own samples confirm these alarming numbers for general PDF documents — the actual accessibility gap is likely even larger.

Companies need to act now — the costs and risks of lacking accessibility are high:

- **legal risks:** Fines up to €100,000 per violation
- **reputational damage:** Negative public impact from legal complaints
- **exclusion:** Potential customers and employees are shut out
- **missed opportunities:** Accessibility improves Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and reach

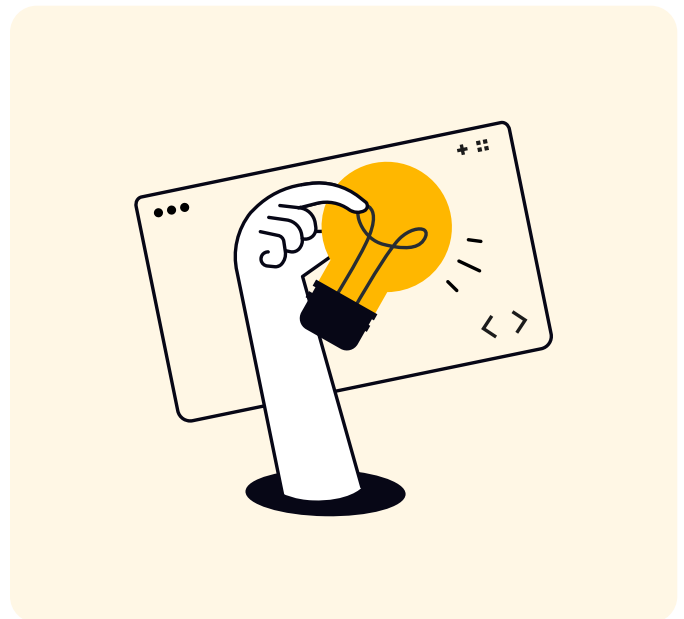
This is particularly critical for:

- forms and interactive PDFs on websites
- all documents in communication with customers
- e-invoices and information sheets in B2B contexts
- PDF manuals and product brochures
- reports, studies, and presentations in public communication

What to expect from this E-Book

On one hand, you'll find practical instructions in this e-book on how to make PDF documents accessible. On the other hand we show additional perspectives that are highly relevant for successful implementation in a business context on an organizational level.

The first section shows you step by step how to create professional and accessible PDF documents — whether you're a designer, work in IT, or are responsible for a digital product. After looking into current challenges, we get down to business:



- You'll learn how to make PDFs compatible with screen readers — including practical tagging instructions.
- You'll discover how to correctly use colors, contrasts, and alternative texts.
- You'll get clear tips for designing forms and interactive content.
- You'll receive a checklist to verify the accessibility of your PDFs.
- And you'll get AI prompts to assist you with PDF accessibility.

The goal: You will be enabled to structure and design PDFs not just more beautifully, but also more accessibly — becoming part of an inclusive digital world.

In the second part on the organizational level, we've compiled relevant information on the legal and economic perspective, as well as on integrating accessible PDFs and documents into business processes.

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Implementation: Making PDFs Documents Accessible

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1. Ensuring Screen Readers Don't Have Blind Spots

Screen readers are the most important interface to the digital world for many users with visual impairments. Yet a PDF without structured tags, labeled content, or defined reading order is often as helpful to screen readers as a blank sheet of paper. What appears visually clear to you — e.g., headings, tables, paragraphs — often remains incomprehensible to assistive technologies.

Here we will show you how to change that.

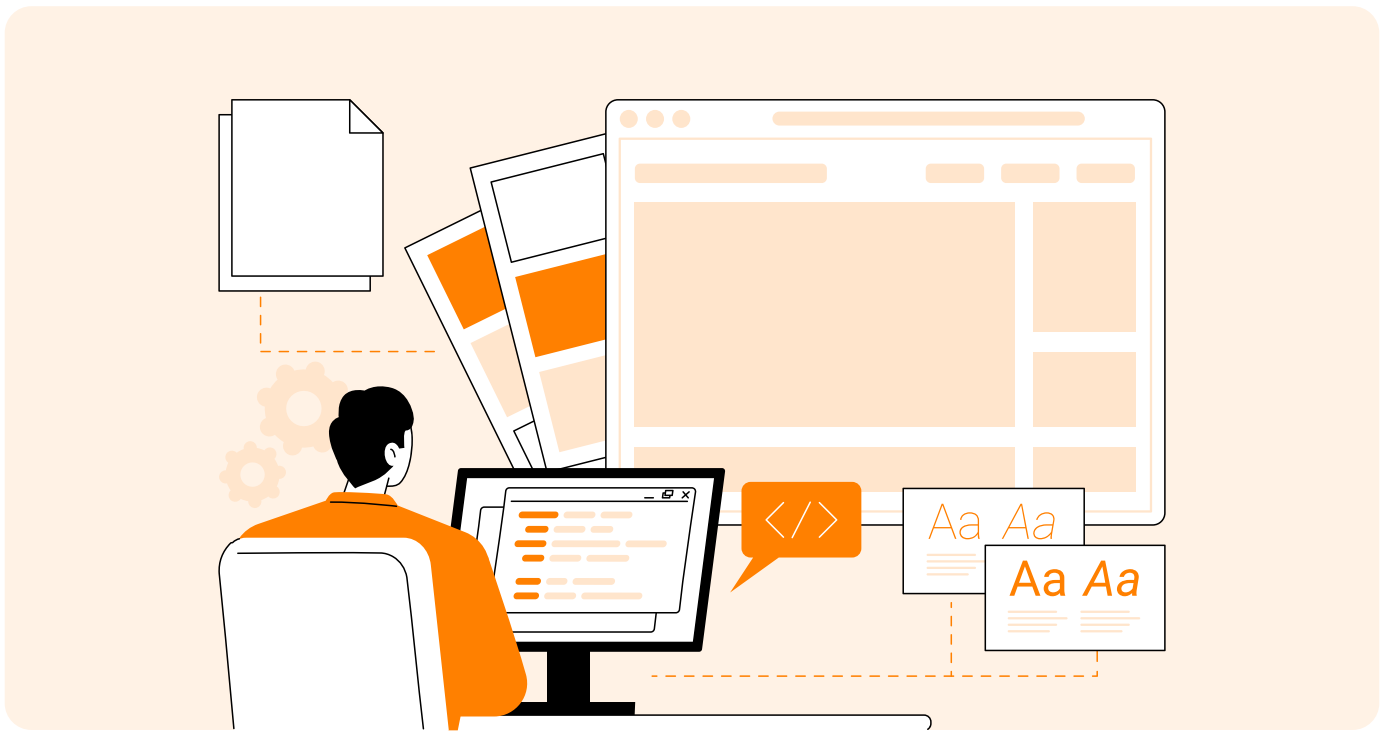
1. Document structure and semantics: What looks like something must be “described” as such

You can't recognize an accessible PDF by its appearance, but by the correct structure in the background. This requires so-called tags — digital labels.

What you should do:

- Use semantic tags for all elements: <H1> for headings, <P> for paragraphs, <L> for lists, <Table> for tables, etc.
- Avoid purely visual layout with text boxes — what appears logically in graphics can be technically chaotic.
- Pay attention to reading order: The tag structure must be linear and comprehensible, otherwise screen readers jump wildly through the text.

Tools like Adobe Acrobat Pro, PDF/UA-Checker, or the Accessibility Check from PAC 2021 help you check and correct this structure.



2. Metadata: Small details, big impact

Metadata is invisible — but it controls how accessible your PDF is.

Pay attention to:

- Setting the document language — e.g., en-US for English. Without this information, the screen reader cannot correctly recognize the language.
- Clearly naming document title and filename — no cryptic abbreviations like “Scan_2345.pdf.”
- Adding tables of contents and bookmarks — especially essential for longer PDFs.
- Improving search functions through well-maintained metadata fields (title, author, subject, keywords).



Pro Tip

- Avoid access restrictions that block reading by assistive technologies.
- If protection is necessary (e.g., due to GDPR): Ensure that read permission for screen readers remains explicitly activated.

3. Security vs. accessibility: Passwords yes, restrictions no

A common mistake: PDF files are encrypted for protection — making them unreadable by screen readers.

4. Interactive elements: Links must be clickable and readable

All links should be correctly linked, functional, and have descriptive link text.

Instead of: www.company.com/download

Better: → Download product information as PDF

5. Tables: The masterclass of accessibility

Tables can be very helpful — or completely incomprehensible. To make them readable:

- Mark tables with structured tags (<Table>, <TH>, <TD>) and correctly define header and data cells.
- Don't use nested tables — this confuses even modern screen readers.
- Avoid layout tables — they look good but cause confusion in interpretation.

2. Contrasts, Colors, Images: Making Your PDF Visible to Everyone

Accessibility isn't just about technology, but also about design. People with poor vision, color blindness, or who rely on screen readers often have difficulties with PDFs that are purely visual. Color combinations, missing alt texts, or weak contrasts can quickly lead to important content being overlooked.

Visual design can easily be made inclusive. Here's how.

1. Graphics and images: When the screen reader comes to nothing

Images and graphics are often crucial for understanding — but only if they are also described.

Pay attention to:

- Alternative text (alt text): Every screen reader needs a text description for images to convey to users what is being shown.
Example: Instead of simply "Image1" → "Chart showing sales development from 2020 to 2024"
- No image-only PDFs: Scanned PDFs without text recognition are practically inaccessible.
- Properly mark decorative images: Not every image needs to be described. If it has no content value, you should mark it as a "background image" or "decorative" — otherwise unnecessary information disrupts the reading flow.

Tools like the PDF Accessibility Checker (PAC) or Adobe Acrobat Pro help you provide alt text correctly.

2. Colors and contrast: Design with moderation

An accessible layout doesn't mean "ugly" — it means well-thought-out. The following points are essential:

- Sufficient contrast between text and background
→ Rule of thumb: Black on white is better than gray on light gray
→ Check your PDFs with the free Contrast Checker from WebAIM
- No communication solely through color
→ Red means "error"? This isn't recognizable for color-blind people. Use additional symbols or text, e.g., exclamation marks or short notes like "Please fill in."
- Readable fonts and sizes
→ Avoid ornate or too small fonts
→ Ideally at least 12 pt, sans-serif fonts, and adequate line spacing

Design is communication — and accessibility is its prerequisite. In this chapter, you've learned how to avoid visual stumbling blocks. The next section is about interactivity and user-friendliness — because PDFs are much more than just static documents.

3. Making Your PDF Truly Usable — for Everyone

An accessible PDF doesn't end with good structure and clear design — that's just where it begins. Especially when your document contains interactive elements, user-friendliness becomes the decisive component. Someone who can't navigate with a mouse or relies on keyboard controls and screen readers must still be able to get through your PDF — without detours, without frustration.

In this chapter, I'll show you how to ensure your PDF remains accessible and intuitively usable for everyone.

1. Forms: Interactive — but please also inclusive

Forms are the biggest stumbling block for many. Why? Because they are often not correctly programmed or labeled.

What you should consider:

- Form fields must be clearly named
→ Instead of “TextField1,” prefer: “Email address (required field)”
- All fields must be accessible via keyboard
→ The tab order should be logical — e.g., from top to bottom, left to right
- Labels must be linked to fields
→ You can accomplish this with tags like <Label> in accessible PDF editors
- Make hints and error messages readable
→ When a field is filled out incorrectly, it needs not only visual feedback (color) but also text like: “Please enter a valid email address.”

2. Adaptable settings: Accessibility also means flexibility

People have different needs — and on different days. An accessible PDF adapts to this.

Therefore, pay attention to:

- Dynamic text enlargement
→ The text should scale without loss of quality
→ Avoid fixed embedded font sizes or pixel-based layouts
- Avoid fixed layout elements
→ No fixed text boxes that don't enlarge with the text
- Settings for colors and contrasts
→ Use system-based display options that can be adjusted, e.g., in dark mode or with inverted colors

3. Searchable text: Without OCR, nothing works

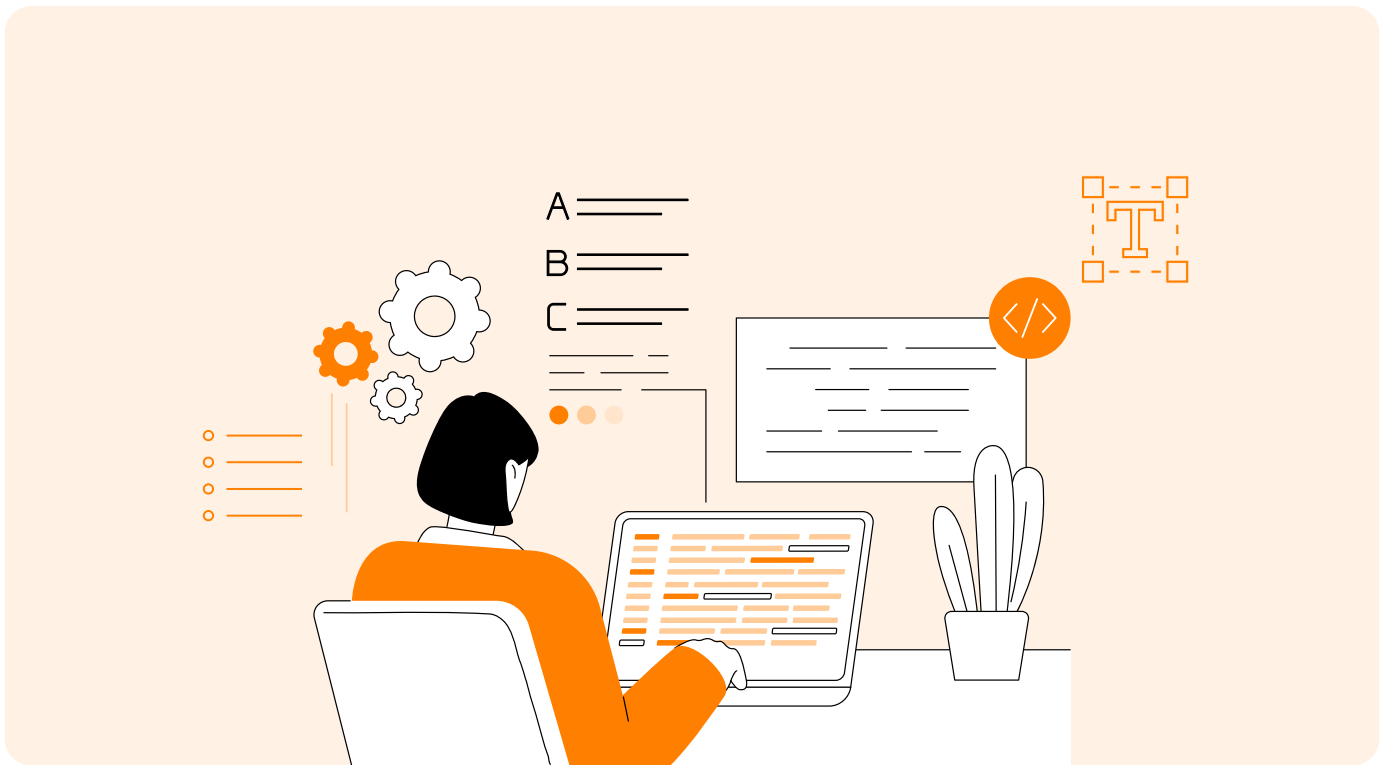
Many PDFs consist of scanned pages — and thus images. Without text recognition (OCR), they are useless for search functions and screen readers.

What you should do:

1. Convert scanned PDFs into searchable text
→ Tools like Adobe Acrobat OCR, ABBYY FineReader, or Tesseract OCR can help
2. Test your PDF file manually
→ Open it, try to highlight a term or find it with Ctrl + F — if this doesn't work, no text recognition is present

Accessibility is not an add-on feature — it is core to digital usability. Now that your PDF is designed to be accessible and interactively usable, it's time for a compact checklist — so you don't forget anything in your next project.

You can download it here.



4. Comprehensive Language For Everyone: Writing Inclusively

Accessibility doesn't end with PDF layout & structure — it often begins with the text itself. Language is a powerful tool for making information accessible. Yet many texts are complicated, convoluted, or full of technical terms that exclude people with cognitive limitations or low reading proficiency.

Here too, you can achieve a lot with simple means — and AI can effectively support you.

What you should pay attention to when writing:

- Short, clear sentences: Maximum one thought per sentence. No nesting.
- Everyday terms: Avoid technical language when not necessary — or explain it.
- Explain abbreviations: Write them out once and then use the abbreviation.
Example: “PDF (Portable Document Format)”
- Clear structure: Use subheadings, bullet points, paragraphs.
- Simple language is not the same as simplified content: You can still convey complex topics accurately but understandably.

5. AI Prompt Suggestions for Supporting Accessibility Criteria

AI can also be used to implement accessibility criteria.

1. For descriptive link texts:

Please convert the following non-descriptive links into accessible, descriptive link labels that are understandable even without context. Avoid phrases like “click here” or “more” and instead clearly describe the link destination. Here are my current links:

[Insert list of links]

2. For alt texts of images:

Create meaningful alternative texts (alt texts) for the following images that precisely describe the content and purpose of each image without the image being visible. The alt texts should be between 5-15 words long and consider both informative and functional aspects. For purely decorative images, mark them as “decorative.” Here is my image description:

[Insert image description or image type]

3. For labeling of form fields:

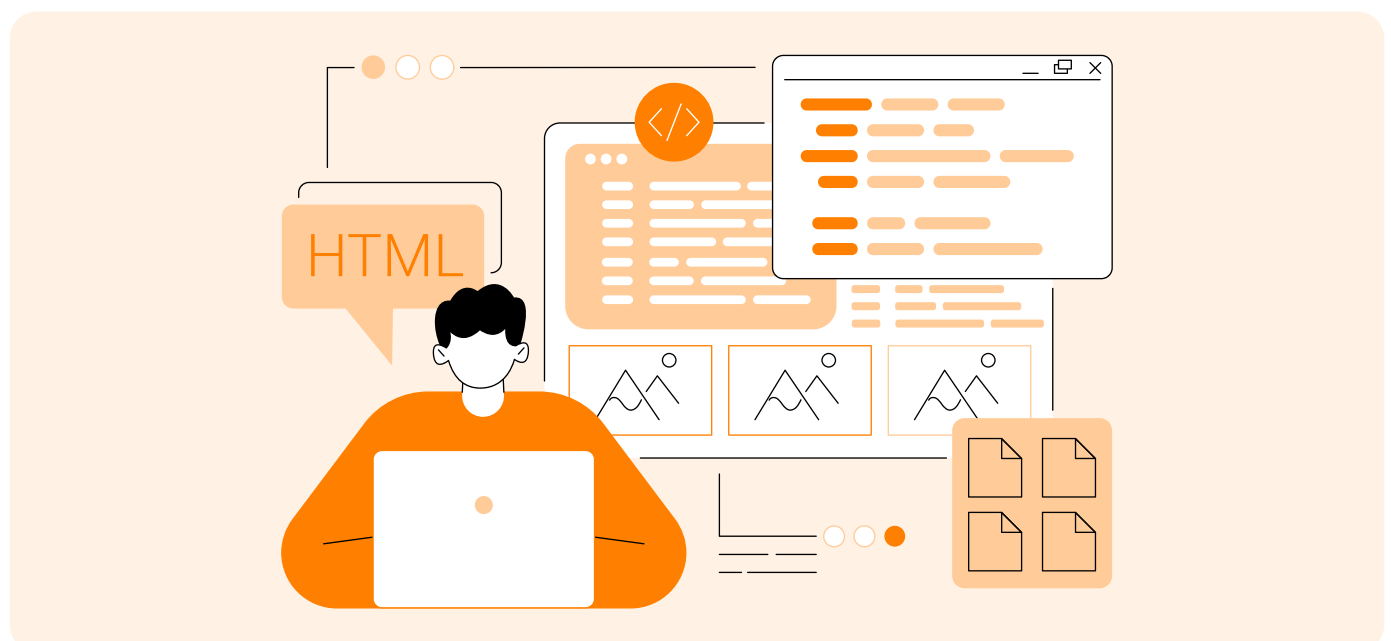
Please revise the following field names in my form to clear, understandable names. Use short, precise terms and avoid technical jargon. Add the note “(required field)” for mandatory fields. Here are my current field names:

[Insert list of field names]

4. For labeling form fields:

Create HTML-compliant labels (label tags) for the following form fields that are correctly linked to the input fields. Ensure that the labels are precise, short, and accessibly formulated. Add a visual AND programmatic note for required fields. Here are my form fields:

[Insert list of form fields with type and function]



5. For hints & error messages:

Formulate helpful hint texts and understandable error messages for the following form fields. The hints should explain the expected format and any restrictions, while the error messages should be constructive and provide clear guidance for correction. Avoid negative or accusatory formulations. Here are my form fields and their validation rules:

[Insert list of form fields with validation rules]

6. For semantic tags:

Create semantic tags for all structural elements: <H1> for headings, <P> for paragraphs, <L> for lists, <Table> for tables, etc.

7. For accessible texts and simple formulations & language:

Reformulate the following text in easily understandable, accessible language. Use short sentences, no foreign words or explain them if needed. Pay attention to clear structure, gender-

inclusive formulations with * symbol, and reader-friendliness also for people with lower reading proficiency. The goal is to have the text written at the level of understandable middle school language:

[Insert your source text here]

8. If necessary, you could add:

- “Use active language and direct address (you-form)”
- “Structure the text in a maximum of 3-5 paragraphs”
- “Formulate technical terms as examples or in images”



Pro Tip

Have the AI also generate follow-up questions — this helps you identify blind spots in your explanation.



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The Organizational Level - Accessible PDFs and Documents in a Business Context

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Legal Compliance and Risks: Why Accessible PDFs Are Not Optional

The EU Directive 2016/2102 and the European Accessibility Act are just the tip of the iceberg. Starting in 2025, concrete financial consequences loom: Fines can amount to up to €100,000 per case, depending on the severity of the violation and company size.

The situation is particularly critical for:

- Financial institutions and insurance companies: Contract documents, applications, and policies must be accessible without exception
- Healthcare: Patient information, package inserts, and therapy materials are subject to stricter requirements
- E-Commerce: Product catalogs, terms and conditions, and invoices in PDF format must be accessible to everyone

The situation is also intensifying internationally: The US Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has already led to thousands of lawsuits due to non-accessible digital content. In 2023 alone, over 4,000 lawsuits were registered — with average settlements of \$25,000 per case.¹

A real case example: A medium-sized company not only had to pay a five-figure sum for an out-of-court settlement but also had to make all PDF documents from the past three years retrospectively accessible — with costs that exceeded the settlement amount many times over.

¹ [The complete guide to ADA website compliance lawsuits for 2025](#)

Economic Benefits for Companies: The Return on Investment

Accessibility may initially appear to be a cost factor, but it quickly pays off: The benefits are diverse and go far beyond mere compliance. From direct cost savings to new customer acquisition to improved brand perception — accessible PDFs create measurable value in various business areas.

Cost comparison: Retrospective vs. integrated accessibility

The numbers speak for themselves: When accessibility is considered from the beginning, costs are significantly lower than with subsequent adaptation. This is mainly due to reduced work steps and avoiding double document processing.

Cost Comparison: Accessibility Implementation

Measure	Retrospective implementation	From the beginning
Business report (100 pages)	approx. €4,000-6,000	approx. €800-1,200
Product catalog (50 pages)	approx. €2,500-3,500	approx. €500-800
Form (5 pages)	approx. €400-600	approx. €150-250

Extended target group reach:

People with disabilities represent a significant market - according to public figures, around 87 million people in the EU live with some form of disability, approximately 20% of the population. These consumers make purchasing decisions, look for jobs, and use services, yet frequently encounter digital barriers that hinder their access.

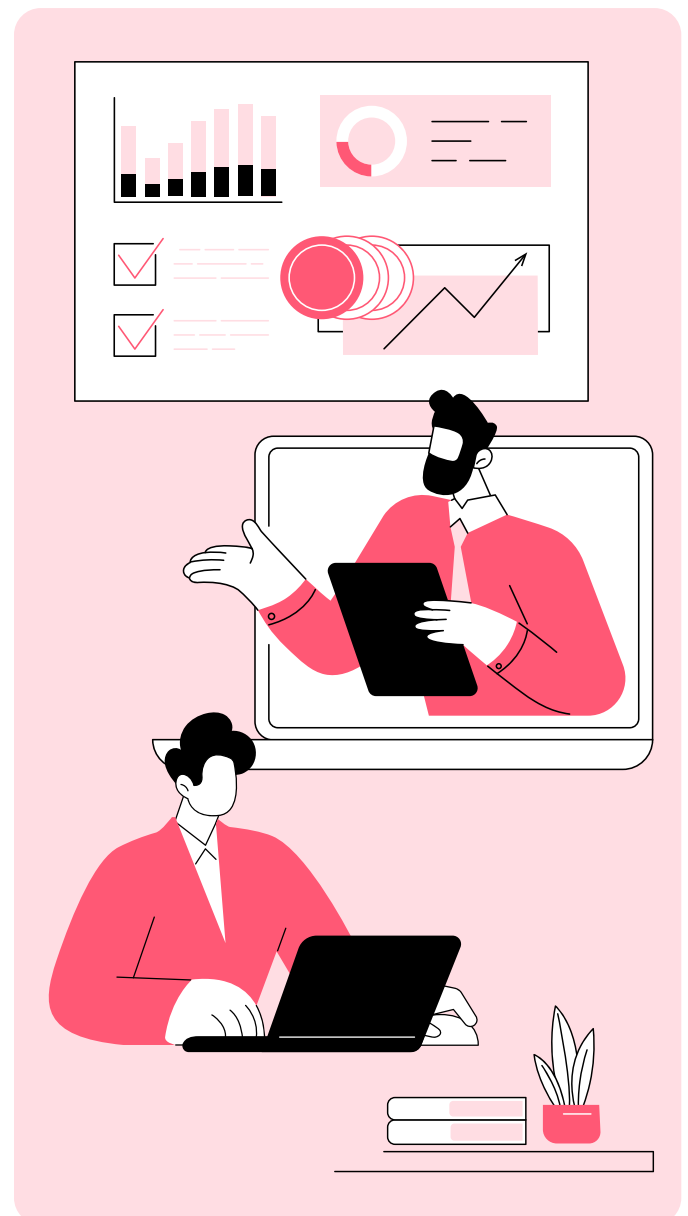
Measurable business benefits:

- Higher conversion rates: Making conversions accessible for all users certainly will increase your conversion rates and drive form completions
- Better employer branding: Inclusive communication also appeals to highly qualified professionals with disabilities
- Reduced service costs: Fewer inquiries and support requests due to self-explanatory, accessible documents

SEO benefits:

Accessible PDFs deliver substantial SEO advantages that extend far beyond compliance. Search engines reward accessibility features with improved rankings, as properly structured content is easier for crawlers to index and understand.

- Enhanced indexing: Properly tagged PDFs with semantic headings and structured content allow search engines to better understand your document hierarchy and context.
- Improved keyword recognition: Searchable text from OCR-processed documents, descriptive alt texts, and proper metadata all contribute to keyword visibility. When search engines can "read" all elements of your PDF, your content becomes more discoverable for targeted search queries.
- Better user experience signals: Accessible PDFs reduce bounce rates and increase time-on-page metrics, as users of all abilities can navigate and consume your content. These positive



user behavior signals tell search engines your content is valuable, further boosting your rankings.

- Mobile-friendly compatibility: Many accessibility features align perfectly with mobile optimization requirements. Documents that adapt well to different screen sizes and offer good readability automatically perform better in Google's mobile-first indexing approach.
- Higher link potential: Accessible, high-quality PDFs are more likely to be linked to by other websites, educational institutions, and accessibility resources. These inbound links are powerful ranking signals that can significantly improve your domain authority.

Practical Migration Guide: Step by Step to an Accessible Document Inventory

The path to a fully accessible document inventory may seem overwhelming. It is therefore sensible and important to approach this task step by step. The following staged plan is a possible approach:

Step 1: Inventory and prioritization

Start with an audit of your PDF documents:

1. Categorization by importance:
 - Category A: Legally critical documents (contracts, terms and conditions, forms)
 - Category B: Marketing materials with high reach
 - Category C: Internal documents
 - Category D: Archive material with low current usage
2. Complexity analysis:
 - Simple: Mainly text, few images, simple structure
 - Medium: Tables, graphics, multi-column layout
 - Complex: Forms, complex tables, interactive elements

Step 2: Pilot project with quick wins

Choose 3-5 documents from Category A or B with medium complexity for your pilot project:

1. Documentation of the current state
2. Complete remediation (accessibility adaptation)
3. Documentation of processes and effort
4. Evaluation and refinement of the approach

Step 3: Resource planning and rollout

Based on insights from the pilot project:

1. Personnel planning: How many hours per document type are needed? What competencies are required?
2. Tool selection: Which tools proved themselves in the pilot project?
3. Budgeting: Realistic cost calculation based on pilot data
4. Creating a timeline: Priority-based planning with clear milestones



Typical Efforts by Document Type

Document type	Effort per page	Recommended prioritization
Simple text document	10-15 minutes	High (quick wins)
Brochure with images	15-25 minutes	Medium
Document with tables	20-40 minutes	Medium to high (depending on usage)
Form	30-60 minutes	Very high (legally relevant)
Complex technical document	45-90 minutes	According to usage level

Step 4: Sustainable implementation

How accessibility becomes the standard:

1. Update templates: Ensure that all document templates are already accessible
2. Create accessibility guidelines: Develop clear, department-specific guidelines
3. Set up training program: Regular training for all document creators
4. Establish monitoring: Set up quality checks and KPIs for accessibility



Pro Tip

Implement “PDF hygiene” — like email hygiene rules, this is a set of simple basic rules that everyone should follow.



Training and Culture Change: Creating Team Awareness

Another important insight: Accessibility in companies is not a one-person show, but teamwork. The following points can help establish a culture of accessibility in a sustainable and stable manner:

Develop practical training:

- Perspective change: Let teams work with screen readers and navigate PDF documents without a mouse
- Hands-on workshops: Transform a problematic document into an accessible one together
- Persona-based training: Develop concrete user scenarios with different disabilities

Establish accessibility champions:

Identify at least one person in each department to be trained as an accessibility champion. This person:

- Is the first point of contact for accessibility questions
- Conducts basic checks before documents are released
- Shares their knowledge in regular short training sessions

Change management for new processes:

1. Create awareness: Clearly communicate why accessibility is important (legally, economically, ethically)
2. Adapt processes: Integrate accessibility checks into existing approval processes
3. Provide tools: Ensure that all stakeholders have access to necessary tools
4. Celebrate successes: Make progress visible and recognize particularly successful implementations

Quick-win strategy:

Start with the documents that are most frequently used or have the greatest reach. This way, you'll quickly achieve visible successes that motivate.



Pro Tip

Create an internal wiki with concrete examples and templates for accessible documents from your own company.

Feedback mechanisms: Learning from users

If you take the topic of accessibility and accessible PDFs seriously, you understand it not as a one-time project, but as a continuous improvement process. Then it's clear: User feedback is essential.

User testing with people with disabilities:

No automatic check replaces real user feedback. Here's how to proceed:

1. Assemble a test group:
 - Users with different screen readers (JAWS, NVDA, VoiceOver)
 - People with motor impairments
 - Users with visual impairments who use magnification software
 - Persons with cognitive limitations
2. Develop practical test scenarios:
 - Concrete tasks instead of general questions
Example: "Find the contact details for inquiries" instead of "Look at this document"
3. Observation and documentation:
 - Measure time for task completion
 - Note problem points
 - Record user workarounds

Important:
Adequately
compensate users
for their time!



Establish feedback channels:

Make it as easy as possible to report problems:

- Direct feedback button in each PDF with mailto link
- Name an accessibility contact person and publish contact details
- Regular surveys on satisfaction with document accessibility

Measuring the degree of accessibility:

Define clear metrics for continuous improvement:

- Technical compliance rate: Percentage of documents without automatically detectable errors
- User success rate: How many test tasks can users successfully complete?
- Efficiency metric: Time that users with assistive technologies need compared to users without aids

Iterative improvement process:

1. Collecting feedback and problems
2. Prioritizing by frequency and severity
3. Solving the most important problems
4. Verifying with affected users
5. Documenting for future documents

Pro Tip

Create a public "accessibility roadmap" that shows which improvements have already been implemented and which are still planned. This creates transparency and trust.



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Conclusion: Accessibility is Progress for All

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Accessibility is not an extra. It is a prerequisite for equal access — and thus for real digital participation. PDF documents are a central format in corporate communication, in the public sector, and in everyday life. All the more important that they are usable for everyone — regardless of abilities, limitations, or technical requirements.

In this e-book, you've learned which typical problems create barriers in PDFs — and how to specifically avoid them. You now know how to establish screen reader compatibility, ensure visual readability, make interactive content accessible, and use language as a key to inclusion.

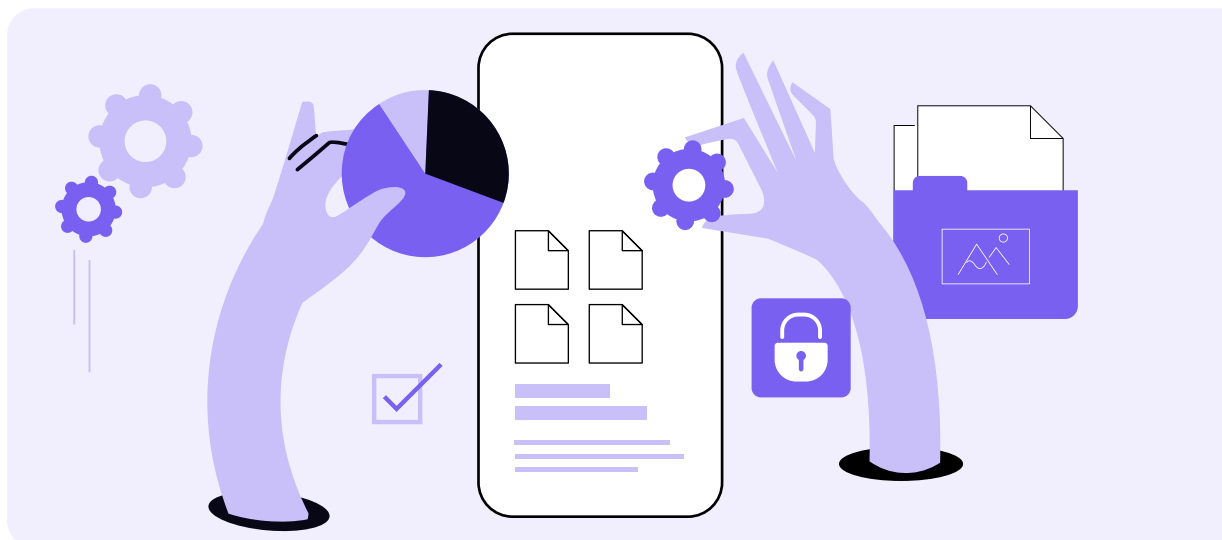
And you know: Accessibility is not a one-time check, but a continuous process — and a signal for quality, appreciation, and digital maturity.

When you design your next documents to be accessible, you're not just creating better access for people with disabilities. You make content clearer for everyone — and build trust that pays off in the long run.

Do not hesitate – start right away.

Checklist

The Final Instance: Checklist for Your Accessible PDF



You've tagged your PDF, adjusted the contrasts, and checked interactive elements — but are you sure nothing is missing?

With this checklist, you can quickly check whether your document meets all the important requirements for accessibility. Ideal for the last step before publication or as a reminder in daily work.

Structure & Tags

- Are all contents marked with semantic tags (headings, lists, tables, etc.)?
- Does the tag order correspond to the natural reading order?
- Is there a correctly tagged table of contents and, if necessary, bookmarks?

Metadata

- Is the main language of the document defined?
- Are title and filename meaningful?
- Are relevant metadata (e.g., author, subject) maintained?

Security

- Do any security settings prevent access for screen readers?

Images & Graphics

- Are all informative images provided with meaningful alt texts?
- Are decorative images correctly marked as such?

Colors & Design

- Do text and background have sufficient contrast?
- Is information never communicated by color alone?

Interactive Elements & Forms

- Can all form fields be operated by keyboard?
- Are field labels logical and clear?
- Are there understandable hints for errors or required fields?

Adaptability

- Can font size, colors, and contrast be adjusted on the system side?
- Is the display stable even with zoom or inverted colors?

Searchability & Text Basis

- Does the document consist of searchable text (OCR present)?
- Do search functions and screen readers work?

Language & Comprehensibility

- Is the language clear, simple, and easily understandable (e.g., at middle school level)?
- Have technical terms, abbreviations, and acronyms been explained or spelled out?
- Are there no unnecessarily nested or too long sentences?
- Are inclusive formulations and gender-inclusive language used?
- Is content logically structured — e.g., with subheadings or paragraphs?



Pro Tip

Print out this list or save it as a template — so it becomes a reliable part of your workflow.

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