# Podcast Transcript: SEO and Accessibility: Google’s perspective

**Robin Christopherson:** Welcome to another episode of The AbilityNet podcast, disability technology inclusion.

I'm your host Robin Christopherson, head of Digital Inclusion at AbilityNet. A pioneering UK charity with a mission to make a digital world accessible tool. Join me on this series to revisit key themes from TechShare Pro 2022. A place where accessibility professionals and allies gather once a year to share and learn together, you can download a transcript of this episode from www dot ability net.org.uk/podcast. So sit back, grab your favourite beverage and let's get started.

Right then guys, we have a brilliant session in store for you here. On The AbilityNet Podcast, we are going to revisit one of the keynote presentations from TechShare Pro, the global accessibility b2b conference that we host every November. And I'm with the mastermind, the evil genius behind TechShare Pro.

How are you doing?

**Mark Walker:** I'm doing very well, thank you

**Robin Christopherson:** Mark Walker who heads marketing as everyone knows here at AbilityNet, but so much more, as well. Okay. This session mark is about SEO. Now you and I search engine optimization you and I were talking about SEO and the overlap with accessibility way back. Can you remember?

**Mark Walker:** Yeah, I think that I think the webinar that we did was in 2014, you know, uh, maybe you and I, I remember that we met then you did something on the internet marketing podcast at the time, and we and we then did a webinar about it. Yeah. And I think that the big difference, you know, what we're about to hear is we're talking to Google about this now. And it's interesting, what what we're hearing the, you know, in the recording is that I think that they're beginning to see the connection, because we were talking to the SEO people, not the accessibility people. But I don't think the accessibility people have quite caught up yet, either. There's a lot of benefit in the in the crossover. We also did a webinar in November, in September 2022. Before TechShare Pro, and involved one of our clients AXA, we talked to their SEO and content teams. So that's also in the archive somewhere, you'll find that on our website. And I think we you know, despite us doing that, nine years ago, I think people have caught up, I think they've begun to realise some of the golden rules for accessibility really helpful for SEO. And that's exactly what you talk to these guys about. And it's all laid out there, you know, that, get your accessibility right, get your SEO right. And they work perfectly for each other, I think.

**Robin Christopherson:** Brilliant. Well, we're about to find out. So I was talking to Christopher Patnoe he's EMEA lead on disability and accessibility. John Mueller, who is a senior search analyst, and also Lizzi Sassman, who is a Senior Technical Writer all at Google. And we're talking SEO, and accessibility.

**Robin Christopherson:** Well, we are really, really pleased to be here. SEO is obviously really high on the priority list of most web teams, marketing teams, it's obviously really important that your information, your hard work is visible on the internet. And we actually have the horse from whose mouth we will hear about the importance of search engine optimization. So from the horse's mouth, we have Google, with us three fantastic experts from Google itself, the home of search engine, rankings, and it's still, I'm sure, by far the most popular search engine, certainly in the English-speaking world. We have three guests, I'm going to ask them to introduce themselves very, very briefly if that's alright, so Chris, should we start with you?

**Christopher Patnoe:** Yeah, hi, my name is Christopher Patnoe. And I'm sorry, you're seeing me yet again. I lead accessibility and disability inclusion for Google for the Europe, Middle East, and Africa.

**John Mueller:** Cool. Hi, I'm John Mueller. I am a search advocate on the Google Search relations team in Zurich. And my team works to connect people who make websites and search engine engineers, essentially, to make sure that we're speaking the right language and giving useful recommendations to both sides.

**Robin Christopherson:** Brilliant, Lizzi?

**Lizzi Sassman:** Hi, I'm Lizzi. I'm also on John's team on the search relations team at Google. I'm a technical writer. And so my primary focus is to document what the Google guidelines are for making an SEO friendly website. And then it's also to speak with people in the community to bring back feedback about how everyone is experiencing those guidelines.

**Robin Christopherson:** Fantastic. And you and John wrote a brilliant article recently about SEO and accessibility. So we've absolutely got the right people on the call here today. Who would like to kick off with their take on the overlap? You know, is it pointing in the right direction? Are there any issues with SEO when it comes to accessibility? When maybe it isn't, you know, there is some friction there. So who would like to get the ball rolling?

**Christopher Patnoe:** Let me start from accessibility perspective, because in all honesty, this is not something that I hadn't really thought about much. Until recently, the podcast between John and Lizzi has triggered some really exciting thoughts with me and, and the work that I do. And the more I thought about it, the more I realised, it's actually the same mission. It's really about connect, communicating with people, connecting people with the websites that they care about connected with the contents that they care about. And if we as Google, with our mission, have to make the world's information universally accessible and useful, if we're to meet that goal, we need to do everything we can to make all of the world's information accessible and useful. That also requires having people help a little bit. And providing alt texts as SEO is one of these two firms, the alt text for people who are blind, they get a chance to see what's actually being displayed, but it's important. And the SEO, it can use the same information, as long as it's done thoughtfully and well. I have no idea how to do that. So I'll leave it to John and Lizzi.

**John Mueller:** Yeah, I, I do think there's a lot of overlap, there is well, on on the one hand, that's partially because I think from the SEO side of things, you want to make websites that work well for everyone. So you want to make sure that when people come to your website through the search engines that they stay that they recommend your website to other people, because that's that's one of the things that Google looks for when it comes to ranking in the search results. Links. Essentially, links are essentially kind of in its basic form recommendations. So if you have users that go to your website, and they can't deal with your content, then they're not going to recommend your your website to other people. So from that level, even everything around accessibility is super important. I think the other angle that is almost a little bit awkward. Is that on on the SEO side of things, SEO is I do like to talk about accessibility as well, because they think that it kind of helps. But they also talk about it because it's something that essentially helps search engine crawlers. So you can think about Googlebot our crawler is essentially a user going to your website and it's it's a user who's who's not. I don't know very smart. They look at the text on the page. They try to understand what you have written there. They understand the headings. They understand the anchor text that you have for links the alt attributes for images and things like that. But essentially, you have to help Googlebot to understand your content. And basically, by doing the normal things for accessibility, at least how I understand them, I'm not an expert. You're doing something that works well for search engine crawlers, as well as for users who need some extra help with accessibility. So from that point of view, it's like, We, on the SEO side, we like to say, why are we doing this for accessibility, but also with kind of the thought in the back of our head? Well, actually, it helps search engines too. So it's like, bonus almost.

**Lizzi Sassman:** Yeah, I mean, I agree with that. I see it as sort of a Venn diagram. And most things fall into the middle section of the Venn diagram from an SEO perspective and from accessibility. For example, alt text, like you mentioned, that would be something that both sides would want.

**Christopher Patnoe:** Done. John, has a question for you from accessibility perspective, is it possible to confuse the crawler like if a page is poorly designed, for example, we can really confuse the screen reader, if everything has a bunch of damages, and you're having to go all over the place. But do we also confuse the search engine in similar ways?

**John Mueller:** I think that can definitely happen. And the divs all over the place. Or if you use kind of CSS tricks to move blocks of text around on a page. That's something where when Google looks at the page and tries to understand the content there, which we do by reading sentences, essentially, if we can't read clear sentences, from the way that the page is structured, then we're going to have a really hard time. So from that point of view, that's something if you create a website with a clean structure, it just makes things a lot easier for Google. And that also goes to things like links, like if you have a button that is styled to look like a link. Or if you just have an image that essentially acts like a link. That's something where Google won't necessarily recognise Well, there's actually a link here that you can follow if you click on this thing. And I imagine from an accessibility point of view, that's that's a similar problem. If you can't recognise that something is a link, but rather uses some fancy JavaScript behind the scenes. How do you guide users to explaining that this is actually something I don't know that they could follow and use on your website?

**Robin Christopherson:** I'm nodding away for any visually impaired listeners today, or watchers, attendees. So absolutely. And your article, guys was mainly had its main focus on alternative text in it. Do you want to give people a kind of a quick rundown onto the best way to use alternative text on images to optimise your SEO?

**Lizzi Sassman:** I'm like looking at John, seeing if John is going to start in fourth, I should start. I think it's funny that you say article because it was actually a podcast recording. But I think we also published a PDF version, a text-based document of what we discussed. And then I think it was shared as an article, just for those who may not know about the context, how we came about joining this event, even John and I were talking about image SEO in general. And then accessibility kind of came up as a hot topic, I guess. But for alt text, from an SEO perspective, it would be using that alt equals attribute on an image. But there's more to just adding that alt attribute or alt tag. It's the words that go into that attribute to describe the image and which images that you need to add that to. And that's something that John and I aren't so sure about to maybe, Christopher, you have some perspective on. which images are important to add that kind of alt attribute to? For example, I wasn't sure about adding too descriptive. Sorry, adding to what might be perceived as like a decorative image, something that's there to add? I don't know like, yeah. So should you add alt attribute to all these kinds of things and what matters for SEO versus for accessibility?

**Christopher Patnoe:** At a high level, you want to mark up the things that matter. So if it's truly decorative, don't include it, you don't need to take go through the effort, because if it doesn't impact the message that you're trying to give, it just makes it pretty. Don't worry about it. But when it comes to the images that are relevant to the images that important, you want to have a thoughtful description of these things. And the last thing of the world we want to have is sort of a key word style. Each ball kids game and now we were, the world is smarter than that what we want to have is sort of, if you're going to do it from a database, I am an NLP on top of it a create a thoughtful sentence does baseball games kid is one thing. But for children playing football, or soccer at the beach means something completely different. And it at one provides actually contexts, not just nouns. So be thoughtful when it comes to doing this, and you have all those same words there. And Google and other engines are smart enough to understand the nouns and make this connection.

**John Mueller:** I think that's, that's fantastic. Because that overlaps so much with what we say as well. You shouldn't just randomly put keywords into the descriptions for the images, it should be something relevant be something that gives context also to the image. So that it's, it's something useful, I guess, for search engines and for users.

**Robin Christopherson**: I wanted to talk then about where there might be some conflicts between SEO and accessibility. And this might be to do with organization's brand, maybe they have certain requirements that they have to meet, that will impact SEO, accessibility. We know about colour contrast, for example, that sort of thing. But is there an area where brand is in conflict with search engine optimization, as well? And I'd be interested to know if you guys have any thoughts around, you know, where SEO and accessibility might not be pushing in the same direction?

**John Mueller:** I think it's, it's tricky, because there's so many aspects included in branding overall. So it's kind of hard to say, Where Where might that not align, but especially your mention of the contrast, colour contrast, for example, that's something where, from an SEO point of view, we we don't really focus on that much when it comes to search, at least on Google side, we basically try to understand the text on the page. And if you have yellow on white background text, then as someone looking at the page, you might might have trouble recognising that text. But for search engines, they would look at that and say, well, there's text here, we can just index that text normally. So that that feels like kind of one of those areas where you're touching upon where? Well, from an accessibility point of view, it's really important that you can actually make your text readable. And from a search engine point of view. If we can find the text on the page, we're kind of happy, I think, the ordering within the HTML, that's something that definitely plays a role. The headings are very important. I love to hear that you use headings because SEO is always ask us about headings. And it's one of those topics where we sometimes refer back and say, well, for accessibility reasons you should do this anyway. But it's fantastic to have someone who's actually saying, well, actually, I do use those all the time. And they're really important.

**Lizzi Sassman:** Yes, and how disruptive it might be if you skip from an h2 to an h4 or something because I see people either doing that or asking about that, like, does this impact anything if they pick it for a style choice, for example. So say their content management system that they're using, the h4 is styled more nicely, I guess just how they might like it visually, but then it's not matching up with the order. And that that could impact other users in other ways. So it's good to hear that, like that would lay out the page for you when you're navigating.

**Robin Christopherson:** So, you know, what tools would you recommend and what kind of workflows that people could use when they're thinking about SEO, and maybe accessibility as well.

**Lizzi Sassman:** So I, I work on the Google Search central documentation site. And I've been doing some improvements for SEO and for accessibility. And one of the tools that I've found helpful in determining what to fix or kind of where the problem pages were, is the tool Screaming Frog, which is an external SEO tool that anyone can use. And it I find it helpful in pulling the list of pages that were missing an alt attribute. So you can sort of query like all the pages that are on your site that are maybe missing something or has an alt attribute that's too short. So you can specify in link text as well, so you can say, you know, anything shorter than 10 characters or something like I'm suspicious that that's actually descriptive. It might be depending on which beggars Yeah, like, it could be. Yeah, specific strings is strings as well. So for example, for link text, I think it automatically checks for things that are saying like, click here as the as the text for a link, and it would find those pages that have links that are suspicious, that might be too short or that could be improved. And then you can add on your own strings that you think might be specific for your website that could be improved.

**John Mueller:** Yeah, I think what's what's interesting about Screaming Frog, I mean, on the one hand, it's not a tool from Google. So I feel awkward promoting it too much. But I found that I found it really useful. But basically, what what it does is it crawls your whole website and looks for these kinds of issues. So on a per page basis, obviously, using something like lighthouse is fantastic. You get so much information in there so much information about the SEO side of things, the speed accessibility as well. But if you have a website with, I don't know, 1000 pages, doing that manually across those pages is really hard. And that's where kind of these crawlers that look at all pages on your of your website, really shine, because you can just let it run over everything you fix the issues, you fix maybe things in your templates that are wrong. And then you double check it again and make sure that it's actually doing better. And I think like Lizzie mentioned, a lot of these things are more about suspicious elements where a tool can't say it's like, oh, this link has to be bad, because it's only nine characters long. Maybe maybe that's okay, but knowing where suspicious things are, you kind of can drill down a little bit better.

**Christopher Patnoe:** If they can, looking at, going into Chrome Lighthouse itself gives you a recommendation and a warning, it doesn't definitively say your contrast is bad, because these kinds of tools, there could be a sampling error in which samples the wrong part of the of an image. And it detects the softest part of a smooth image, for example. So that contrast not might not be good, but the rest of the image is fine. So even in lighthouse, you don't want to definitively say this is a problem. This is a warning; this is something you should check. So even when just just doing accessibility separate from SEO, just doing accessibility, you want to go in and manually verify these things too.

**Robin Christopherson:** What about key trends, future developments? Where do you see this area going? Is there any kind of tips or insights that you can give us in what Google might be doing in the future when it comes to, to SEO, and maybe accessibility as well.

**John Mueller:** Where I think there is still room for growth and whether or not that will actually happen? Who knows. But it feels like there's still some opportunities. For example, we have the page experience ranking factor, which is based on the core web vitals, which is a set of metrics that we use to try to understand if a page is fast, if a page is reasonable, when it's loading, how interactive it is, if it shifts around while you try to engage with the page. And that's something where, at the moment, it uses three factors there. It also uses security and mobile friendliness. And I think some other factor that I just forgot. But it feels like this is one of those factors where we try to understand the user experience of a page. And that kind of maps to accessibility as well. And I could imagine at some point in the future, maybe we have some factors there that are more focused around accessibility. And I can't promise this. So this is more like my, my vague thinking that maybe something like this could happen. It's also something where the the folks working on Chrome are very engaged with the core web vitals. There's an open-source community that's active all-around speed, and accessibility, and all of these kinds of factors that could be used for for this kind of metric. So that's something where if someone is really engaged on the accessibility side of things and wants to be active in the open-source world, that might be a great place to start as well and kind of push things along and say, well, here is this really clean, objective measurement about accessibility. And it would be really helpful if Google were to promote it as well. And then some some kind of collaboration I think could happen there.

**Lizzi Sassman:** I think what can be tricky is maybe the alt text aspect because something that you could check is just isn't there not like a binary like do they have it or not? That measuring if it's good alt text is sort of like up for discussion. It's hard to have that kind of baked into the tool or to have that as like clear actionable guidance, like you can for core web vitals for example, like we have, it's a number like you can measure it and then measure improvement. But for writing good descriptive alt text, I don't know.

**Christopher Patnoe:** Especially if you take a look at internationalisation, you'll get one language is one thing, looking at all languages makes it even that much harder than getting binaries easy a useful as harder, and then it gets even harder internationally. I get asked this question a lot, why can't google just see the pages accessible and only promote those pages that are accessible, because it's really hard to determine if it is even colour contrast, because the sampling topic that I talked about just a moment ago, that's really hard to know as well. So we would want to, if we were to do this, we would want to be really, really sure that we're right, and make it possible for people to measure for themselves, or else, it wouldn't be fair for anyone.

**Robin Christopherson:** Now, I'm struggling every day with inaccessibility, but I really wouldn't like to have pages that had the key content that I needed, demoted to page four or five of the search engine rankings, because they aren't fully accessible, you know, so there's definitely a balancing act there as well. So whilst I'm, you know, calling for a certain amount of accessibility to be factored in to encourage best practice, at the same time, yeah, if those if I mean, 98% of homepages tested, they tested 2 million home pages, and 98% didn't even meet the base level of of accessibility, the single a, when we know that double A the middle level is the sort of legal requirement in most locations in most regions. So this kind of brings me on to, to AI, because Lizzi was talking about how it's really difficult. And Chris as well about alternative text, you know, it's binary, Is it there or not? And then after that, it's, you know, is it a decent one, and that is going to take a massive leap in AI? But, you know, there's a lot of artificial intelligence at play at the moment, I'm sure in the algorithms already, how much does it play a factor in, say, the readability of a page, because that's got a massive impact on accessibility, you know, use of good plain English so that people can understand it, you know, with a reading age of, you know, less than 12, for example, which is the national average here in the UK. So, you know, things like that, are we within, you know, reaching distance of that sort of thing being factored in?

**John Mueller:** I don't know. I think I don't know if we have talked about kind of the the reading level determination, or something along those lines, when it comes to search yet. So it's, it's something where, from the communications that we do with site owners, it's usually more positioned as something where you should be speaking the language of your audience, where you know, your audience best, you know, how they speak, essentially, how they read, how they type, what they're looking for, and you should be speaking their language. And that's, I think, on a very high level, what we try to do someone who's searching for a headache, they're not looking for a scientific paper about all of the possible causes of headaches, they, I don't know, they just want some tips, maybe some information. And that's something where I think, there there's a large kind of mapping of what people are searching to what you actually have on your page, which, which plays a role there, where even if you don't understand the reading level of a page, or take that into account, if someone is searching for very, I don't know common words, then if you have those common words on your pages, then of course, that will match kind of from a natural point of view already, even without taking any of the advanced things into account. And whether or not reading level, for example, is used I, I could imagine that it's something that might be taken into account, just purely because it's something that has been around for such a long time. And these metrics exist. So maybe someone at Google, or almost certainly someone at Google has taken a look at these metrics and tried to figure out, is this something that actually helps us or not? Because ultimately, we have to give results that are relevant and useful for users. And like you mentioned your example with accessibility. If you're searching for something specific, and we show you something that is accessible but doesn't match what you're looking for. That's that's not useful at all. So it's, it's kind of something where if we can determine that this metric helps to provide better search results, and I'm pretty sure that this is actually being used at Google. I don't know if it's actually useful in providing better search results. But kind of that aspect of if it's something that can be measured, and especially if there are well known mechanisms to measure these things and almost certainly someone at Google has tried to see if there's a way to help improve the search results that way.

**Christopher Patnoe:** It I don't think anyone wants us to be an arbiter of what's appropriate language or not. That's, that's not what we're here to do, we're here to provide the best information as quickly as possible. I think what you're asking if I would make a fantastic plugin for someone to download, so if they have a need for assistance, then they can contextually turn it on and have a page processed. for them. That makes more sense to me and a great use of AI. Instead of having us decide that this is the appropriate for someone,

**Lizzi Sassman:** I think having a plugin that could tell me what the reading level is, could be helpful when I'm drafting so that I can see if it's aligning with whatever my intention was, because it might be that I'm writing something that's academic, I guess, in nature, and then therefore, I wouldn't be like put off by the fact that it says 12 grade reading level. But if I'm wanting to write something that's beginner level, then I could edit to make it more approachable, using easier to understand words and shorter words. But I think, as you pointed out, it depends a lot on the type of document that you're writing, and audience.

**Robin Christopherson:** I totally get that. And there are certainly authoring tools that will help people get the right level of readability that, you know, for their particular audience and choose the right tone and style that they they desire. But I think with the search engine itself, if there was, you know, a plugin or some settings, user preferences to say, you know, prefer these kinds of pages now, that might be impossible, because indexing the Internet is a big ask anyway. So have to do that, you know, multiple times for different sets of user preferences. Or maybe it's something that can happen live? I doubt it. So there's some technical challenges there. But wow, wouldn't it be amazing if Google as a search engine had a lot of user preferences in there? That would give them prioritised search results to cater for their particular needs or their particular requirements. So wow, that would be amazing.

**John Mueller:** I think, I think that's something where we do have a lot of settings, not necessarily for reading level. But it is something where I feel there are already a lot of settings. And adding even more settings makes it even harder to find the right setting for what you're looking for. And the the angle that I'm always a little bit worried about is that you end up isolating yourself in your small island where you're like, this is exactly the content that I want. And you'd never see anything outside of that island. And that would be kind of a shame. Like there should always I feel be some mechanism for the search engine to say, well, actually, here's some content that really matches what you're looking for. But it's not matching your options that you have specified.

**Robin Christopherson:** Brilliant, well, let's kind of start to draw things to a close, let's talk about if you guys have got any top tips about how people who, after having heard about this, and all the other TSP sessions, you know, are really fired up about accessibility. And whether they can whether they're in SEO or any other area of digital within their organisation, you know, what, what would you recommend that they can do to get the wheels turning within their organisation and get accessibility up the agenda.

**Christopher Patnoe**: I've got one, there's a great website called Web dot dev slash accessible, right? I'm sorry, if I steal your thunder, John. This is a great a great, relatively new resource that has some fantastic tips and contents. That's really good for general accessibility and web.

**John Mueller:** And I think from from an SEO point of view, anything that you do for accessibility, it will work for SEO as well. I think the the one angle for SEO, that you should also think about if you're kind of vaguely interested in this, this overlap is making sure that the words on your page actually match what the user is looking for. And it's something that is very easy to say. But it's also very common that you look at a very expensive website, and it looks really nice and flashy and everything. But you're like, well, what does this company actually do? And putting clean words on a page, it just makes such a big difference?

**Robin Christopherson:** Well, I'm big on words, because I can't see pictures. So like, I'm with you there. Words rule. Lizzi?

**Lizzi Sassman:** Yeah, I mean, web dot Dev, excellent resource for finding out like a good primer to what is important for making your website accessible. And then from an SEO perspective, plus one to what John was saying. You can also use the mobile friendly test from Search Console to test to see how Google Googlebot sees your webpage. So if you want to see if if the text is showing up, or if it's a blank page, that is a good way to test to see how the crawler views your webpage.

**Robin Christopherson:** Fantastic. And I will reiterate. If there wasn’t a transcript to that podcast and then it wouldn’t exist on the internet. It wouldn’t be indexable. So you know words, the power of words. So brilliant. Thank you so much guys, I really really appreciate it. Hope everyone has had a brilliant TechShare Pro and we’ll see you next time.