

Accessible social networking in practice, the GDF-SUEZ experience in France

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Overview

An international leader in energy explains its decision to use and promote accessible Web 2.0 tools and recounts its experience in creating a social networking site that is accessible to people with disabilities.

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I. Accessibility of Web 2.0 : what norms to apply ?

1) Web accessibility in France : an obligation by the law

Have you ever thought of an upside-down world where each valid person meets obstacles on a daily basis, a world where society is reachable to any but you ? In fact, if the norm was to find only Braille printed books in a library, it would be difficult for most of the valid persons to have access to information, education or culture...

This is the kind of daily situation that the persons with disabilities are confronted with when they go on the Web at home or even at work. In countries that give the same rights to every citizen, on what norm(s) are these Web sites designed?

Public opinion changes, so do laws. Today, each country - in Europe, for instance - is voting a « non-discrimination law ». In France, such a law¹ is called « *Equal rights and opportunities, participation and citizenship of disabled persons* » adopted on 11 February 2005. Such laws make it mandatory to enable accessibility to all aspects of society for the person with disabilities : buildings, jobs... and access to electronic information as well. If the public sector is directly under the law, the private sector is more and more pushed to do so.

Thus, the legislative power has expressed its will, associations are reinforcing their awareness campaigns based on the law and some companies are pioneering this path of job equality and respect for all.

However, when taking the shared political view of an equalitarian digital society into concrete process, products, services, Web sites... that are accessible to all, we meet difficulties. When asked by Web players, what can answer a resource organization as AccessiWeb to the question : **what norms to apply ?** .

2) Web accessibility: from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0

Thanks to the work of W3C/WAI² about the accessibility of Web contents (more known as WCAGs³) since 1999, Web providers and owners have solid recommendations to implement into this kind of content. All know that it may have different methods with slight differences to apply the WCAGs but for the classical Web sites (set of static Web pages), norms and methods exist so.

However, the Web has changed so much and so fast since 1999. The arrival of what is commonly called **Web 2.0** has further complicated the potential answer(s). The Web 2.0 is more and more oriented towards interaction between users who have become content makers, potentially read by any net user.

The Web 2.0 is complex and constantly evolving but it can be define that way : it includes server software, syndication, online content management system, messaging protocols, next generation browsers, and various client applications. These additional approaches provide Web 2.0 with Rich internet application techniques such as AJAX and user generated content.

At this stage, it must be underline that the Web 2.0 Web services are more and more used both in the professional world and on the net in general as **social networking Web sites**. The issue of its accessibility, more or less solved in the classical Web, is back with the same question : what norms to apply ?

¹ Law n° 2005-102 :

<http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000809647&dateTexte=>

² W3C/WAI : <http://www.w3.org/WAI/>

³ WCAGs : <http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag.php>

3) Web 2.0 accessibility issues

We can notice different issues relevant to most social networking Web sites :

- **Security** : the CAPTCHA solutions are often not accessible.
- **Code of Web pages** : like the classical Web, the code of social networkings Web pages must apply the WCAGs.
- **Dynamic content** : enabling screen readers to recognize that web-page contents have been updated.
- **User generated content** : the interface of the Web-based CMS must be accessible and the generated content, too. The recommendations called ATAGs⁴ for authoring tools must be applied so in social networkings Web sites.
- **Mass of new content** : the content is changed very often, grows on the same page and is not always accessible through the keyboard, shortcuts and a logical information structure.
- **New functionalities and new way of using the Web** : it is clear for anyone that social networking Web sites offer new functionalities that make the Web experience different for the user. This change in habits can be a true barrier for a person with disabilities (the issue here is not technical). The usability of Web pages becomes more important than it was for the classical Web sites.
- **Assistive technologies and API** : even when social networkings Web sites are well coded, many persons with disabilities are not using an updated version of their assistive technology software that can interface with Web 2.0 programmatic elements like AJAX (when implemented).
- **Interoperability with other social networking Web sites** : that is a difficult accessibility issue for an obvious reason (how to make accessible a Web service which is not ours...).

4) Shared experience can solve number of accessibility issues in social networking Web sites

The Web has changed and if we want the accessibility of the Web to become a reality, there is a huge need for solving the accessibility issues raised by the interactive evolution of the Web.

As the norms are not yet published for the Web 2.0 Web sites and especially for the social networking ones, shared experiences are necessary. When this is done by one of the world's leading players in the field of energy, GDF SUEZ, it can help to reduce the digital gap for persons with disabilities and provide with relevant inputs for the next international recommendations of the W3C/WAI on the Web 2.0.

II. GDF SUEZ and digital accessibility: a corporate commitment

As one of the world's leading players in the field of energy, GDF SUEZ produces, transports, distributes and sells gas, electricity and services in some forty countries worldwide. The Group employs more than 198,000 people.

For GDF SUEZ, providing access to information for everyone is a commitment that is every bit as fundamental as providing access to energy for everyone. In 2007, GDF SUEZ thus set itself a target of making all the content and services of its websites accessible to all Internet users, including those with disabilities.

This goal called for work on two fronts:

⁴ ATAGs : <http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/atag.php>

- mobilising and changing the habits of all the Group's players involved in web projects so as to ensure that accessibility was integrated into all day-to-day processes,
- working on the accessibility of functions for which there were few, if any, references.

It soon became clear that a radical shift in the approach would be required, the aim no longer being to make a website or intranet accessible, but to ensure that accessibility would be seamlessly integrated into the organisation itself in a sustainable manner.

Over the past year, GDF SUEZ has therefore been implementing accessibility training plans for its operational staff and has created an accessibility expertise unit internally. An internal communication plan has also been implemented to follow this change. An accessibility steering committee has been created to steer and monitor the work. The management's commitment at the highest level is also a key factor of the project's success.

For GDF SUEZ, one of the first conclusions was that accessibility relies just as much on organisation and change management as it does on technology.

GDF SUEZ's aim of making all of its content and services accessible meant that the Group would have to work on the accessibility of functions for which there were few, if any, references. GDF SUEZ has thus gradually been making its stock market information, its video library and its annual report accessible.

Recently, GDF SUEZ has turned its attention to the accessibility of Web 2.0 tools.

III. Accessible Web 2.0 tools and incorporating accessibility into the creation of a social networking site

1) The importance of Web 2.0 tools for GDF SUEZ

Web 2.0 is a concept and a way of thinking designed to foster interactions between the players on a given market (customers, prospective customers, prescribers, employees, experts, etc.). With Web 2.0, websites become cooperative and interactive: users become contributors in their own right.

Content syndication and aggregation (RSS feeds), rich web applications, fast response times and greater interactivity than traditional web applications, neural networks (fuzzy keyword search engines, web semantics), collaborative working and social networking are all Web 2.0 tools increasingly used by GDF SUEZ. The Group is working to make them fully accessible.

A social networking site is a website that enables users to create a profile (i.e. to become a member), and then interact with other members: invite friends, share ratings, react in user group forums, exchange information, play interactive games, etc. GDF SUEZ uses social networking sites both for the company's internal requirements and for its communication on the Web.

2) GDF SUEZ's plan for an accessible social networking site

In order to foster its dialogue with all its stakeholders on various issues related to energy and sustainable development, GDF SUEZ has been working for the past few months on designing a social networking site. This application, an interactive platform where anyone can look for information, add content or interact with other Internet users, has been designed around two key premises:

- the development of interaction and communication between users (creation of a personal space, detailed profile, blogs, etc.),
- the pooling and sharing of knowledge and experience (shared database, shared documents, information about the news of the network, etc.).

Given the commitments of GDF SUEZ concerning accessibility, one of the key elements of this social networking site involved integrating accessibility considerations as of the design phase:

- integrating the Group’s accessibility standards into the specifications,
- retaining a company specialising in making web applications accessible,
- performing accessibility audits at each stage of the design of the social networking site,
- selecting solutions that are compatible with accessibility where need be. For instance, GDF SUEZ did not want to use AJAX for the implementation of the social networking site because the ARIA guidelines are not supported by the version of web browsers and assistive technologies commonly used.

Another key factor of success would be the Group’s ability to involve its staff and contractors in furthering accessibility, both internally and externally, as, from GDF SUEZ experience, service providers in France still lack a proper accessibility culture.

The solution chosen for the social networking site incorporates main of level A WCAGs, as well as some of level AA and of level AAA. It was developed in PHP/MySQL, based on components drawn from the Joomla freeware application.

The main conclusions are as follows:

- In a social networking site, many functions can be developed using “traditional” technologies for which the implementation of accessibility is relatively straightforward: displaying articles, voting, options for reacting to an article, for consulting the various themes, for submitting an expert opinion, for providing a rating, for consulting one’s profile, etc.
- One of the key aspects of social networking sites is that they allow Internet users to contribute content. It is at this level that the respect of accessibility is most problematic, because it’s not only about providing accessible contribution tools that produce accessible content, but also about training Internet users to use these tools in an accessible way.

Having worked on both these aspects, GDF SUEZ now proposes to share its experience during the W3C Workshop on the Future of Social Networking which is due to be held in January 2009 in Barcelona.

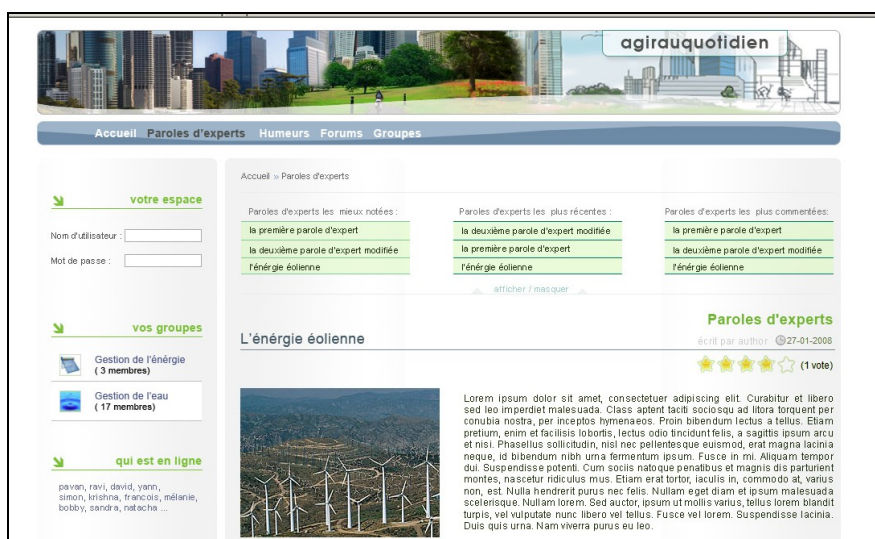


Figure 1 : snapshot of the social networking home page (provided by GDF SUEZ)