Temporary & Situational Disabilities

What is it for?

People often link accessibility with permanent disabilities. For example, someone born without the use of their hands, or someone who lost their sight later in life. But disability exists on a much wider spectrum.

A temporary disability will go away over time, like a broken arm or an eye infection that makes screens painful to look at.

A situational disability is when your surroundings create the same barriers as a disability, even though nothing is wrong with your body. Trying to read a phone in bright sunlight makes even a clear, high-contrast screen almost impossible to see. Being in a loud pub makes it nearly impossible to follow any audio content without captions.

Designing for accessibility doesn't just help disabled people, who make up around 1 in 4 people in the UK. It improves the experience for everyone because at some point in their lives, most people will find themselves in one of these situations.

Temporary and situational disabilities are a key part of the Microsoft Inclusive Design framework. It describes permanent, temporary, and situational impairments to movement, vision, hearing, and speech. Many Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) rules, such as captions, good colour contrast, and touch target sizes, also help people in these situations. This is true even when the rules weren't written with them in mind.

How to support it

Thinking beyond permanent disability unlocks a much bigger picture. Designing for the extremes means everyone in the middle benefits too.

- Designers can ask 'what if someone is doing this in harsh sunlight?' when checking colour contrast. This helps someone with low vision just as much as someone on a sunny day.

- Developers can add captions to all video content. Essential for someone who is d/Deaf, but also useful for anyone watching without headphones.
- Product Managers can include situational scenarios in user stories, like 'a user completing this task while commuting', so real-world constraints are considered from the start.

The more teams think this way, the harder it becomes to see accessibility as a niche concern. Designing for someone holding a baby also means designing for someone with a broken arm, and for someone with a permanent upper limb disability. One solution, three problems solved.

Useful links

- Microsoft Inclusive Design: Recognizing Exclusion
- World Wide Web Consortium (W3C): Diverse Abilities and Barriers