

Overview

- There is a strong business case to make your digital products accessible to all users
- Postsecondary institutions are legally required to buy accessible products
- Disabled and nondisabled users will benefit from accessible design throughout your products' lifecycles
- The VPAT/ACR and HECVAT are two common instruments for communicating the accessibility of your products

Table of Contents

- [Overview](#)
- [What is the Digital Accessibility Vendor Cookbook?](#)
- [The Accessibility Business Case](#)
- [Digital Accessibility and the Law](#)
- [Disability and Technology](#)
- [Institutional Accessibility Standards](#)
- [Documenting Accessibility](#)
- [Maintaining Accessibility After the Sale](#)

What is the Digital Accessibility Vendor Cookbook?

Accessibility is an essential factor in the purchasing decisions of colleges and universities where building inclusive educational and employment experiences is both a value and an obligation. The Digital Accessibility Vendor Cookbook is a tool to support vendors to create and deliver digital products that meet the accessibility needs of institutions of higher education.

This cookbook will:

- Present the information you need to understand digital accessibility in the marketplace of higher education

- Emphasize the value of digital accessibility from diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as well as financial and legal perspectives
- Explore strategies you can implement as a vendor to develop accessible products
- Promote collaborative relationships between vendors and universities in creating accessible and inclusive environments in higher education

Who this cookbook is for

If you work at the intersection of digital technology and higher education, this cookbook is for you. This includes decision-makers at technology vendor companies; designers, developers, and testers; legal consultants, procurement staff, and administrators.

In this cookbook:

- The accessibility business case: Understand why accessibility makes good business sense in the higher education marketplace.
- Disability and technology: Learn about the different ways users interact with tools and technologies and how you can incorporate this understanding into your design process.
- Digital accessibility and the law: Know how the legal landscape of higher education informs institutional standards and practices.
- Accessible product development and testing: Improve your practices of accessible development as well as in-house and third-party assessment.
- Documenting your product's accessibility: Understand VPAT/ACR, HECVAT, and other formats vendors can use to document accessibility in their product lifecycle.
- Supporting accessibility after purchase: Learn steps to take after purchase including establishing accessibility contacts, planning a reporting process, and communicating accessibility-related changes.

The Accessibility Business Case

Key Points

- The return on investment (ROI) for accessibility extends well beyond disabled users
- Campus DEI culture includes a demand for accessibility
- Accessibility implementation is much less costly and is easier when compared to accessibility remediation
- Campus leaders are concerned about legal ramifications of inaccessibility

Accessibility Return on Investment (ROI)

Accessible design intersects with good mobile design.

- Example: Web pages that automatically reformat in response to magnification tools benefit both people with low vision and people using small screens. It is also important for both user categories that these reformatted pages do not require left-right scrolling.
- Example: Buttons that can only be activated with a mouse will not be responsive to the touch screens used by most mobile users or to alternative input strategies used by many disabled individuals.

Accessible design intersects with good usability.

- Example: Web pages often include navigation aids such as breadcrumb trails, which appear at the top of the page and look like "Home->Topic->Subtopic." These can help users with cognitive disabilities as well as anyone unfamiliar with the website.
- Example: High color contrast between text and background benefits people with many types of disabilities, as well as individuals trying to read screens in environments with too much or too little light.

Accessible design intersects with search engine optimization (SEO) to help people find your page more easily.

- Example: Tools that accommodate disabled individuals and search engines both benefit from text that describes the content of photos and other images.
- Example: Closed captioning on videos can also contribute to SEO.

- Example: Unique and descriptive page titles both help users recognize what page they are on and provide useful results in online searches.

Campus DEI Culture

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are becoming increasingly common on college and university campuses. For example, 95% of institutions that have a high amount of research activity also have a senior DEI executive. (1)

Although disability is not always considered in DEI initiatives (2), institutions such as Louisiana State University are defining their initiatives as "DEIA," where the "A" stands for accessibility (3). Digital accessibility is a tangible and well-documented starting place to ensure disabled students, faculty, and staff feel included at their academic institution.

Cost-Effectiveness of Accessibility Implementation

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) includes guidelines about heights for installing water fountains. It costs nothing extra to install the fountain at a compliant height. However, ripping out and reinstalling a non-compliant fountain can be costly in terms of both money and time.

Digital accessibility is similar. Planning to create accessible products up front may take some additional time and thought, but it will be much cheaper and easier than implementing accessibility as an afterthought in response to customer complaints or requests.

Legal Ramifications

According to a 2022 report, 96% of audited postsecondary websites failed to meet basic accessibility standards, and 61% of these institutions face a high or very high risk of litigation (4). The increase in online and hybrid learning caused by the COVID pandemic brought with it a 1,700% increase in accessibility lawsuits during 2020 (5).

Legal audits include procured third-party products as well as websites developed in-house. Therefore, settlements and preventative measures include attention to accessibility in the RFP, contract, and renewal phases of procurement. Being able to prove the accessibility of your product up front will facilitate each of these phases with many institutions.

The University of Minnesota maintains a long [list of postsecondary institutions](#) that have faced lawsuits and complaints related to one or more digital accessibility violations. In most cases, this has resulted in a settlement where the institution commits to a rigorous program of ensuring digital accessibility going forward.

Summary

- Implementation of accessible design can increase your academic customer base by demonstrating responsiveness to legal and DEI concerns.
- Implementation of accessible design will facilitate other priorities, such as mobile compatibility.
- Implementation of accessible design up-front will enhance your cost effectiveness.

Citations

- (1) Ellsworth, Diana, et al. 2022. "[Racial and ethnic equity in US higher education.](#)" McKinsey and Company, July 18.
- (2) Scheef, Andrew, Cyndi Caniglia, and Brenda L. Barrio. 2020. "[Disability as Diversity: Perspectives of Institutions of Higher Education in the U.S.](#)" Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 33 (1), pp. 49-61.
- (3) Louisiana State University. 2022. "[Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility \(DEIA\) Resources.](#)"
- (4) Bureau of Internet Accessibility. 2022. "[Why Colleges and Universities Face More Web Accessibility Lawsuits.](#)" Blog, June 27.
- (5) Weissman, Sara. 2020. "[Universities Face Digital Accessibility Lawsuits as Pandemic Continues.](#)" Diverse Issues in Higher Education, September 8.

Further Reading

- Forbes.com. "[The Power of the Purple Dollar: A Business Case for Web Accessibility.](#)".
- W3C Web Accessibility Initiative. "[The Business Case for Digital Accessibility.](#)"
- Deque.com. "[The Business Case for Accessibility.](#)"
- Viget.com. "[The Business Case for Accessibility.](#)"

Digital Accessibility and the Law

Key Points

- Purchasing or using inaccessible products increases legal risk for the university.
- Specific federal legislation affects any university that receives federal funding.
- The Department of Justice has consistently described digital accessibility as within the scope of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

People with disabilities are protected from discrimination by civil rights laws. Universities are legally required to ensure equal access for students, faculty, and staff with disabilities.

Some of these laws are federal legislation. Since universities receive federal funding (in the form of financial aid, for example, or in funding for research being done at a university), we are bound by federal law.

In addition to federal legislation, there is often legislation about civil rights at the state level that universities must adhere to; also, most universities have web or digital accessibility policies.

In this document we will only discuss the legislation that all universities in the Big 10 Academic Alliance must adhere to. The prominent federal laws are:

- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990
- The U.S. Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (an extension of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; which includes Sections 504 and 508)
- Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act (ACA)
- Additional accessibility laws and regulations which may be more narrowly applicable depending upon industry or the purpose of the product(s) you offer.

Unlike individual vendors or publishers, universities have specific legal obligations related to digital accessibility. There are many court cases, settlements, and resolution agreements which demonstrate regulators' view of digital accessibility as part of existing disability civil rights laws. This means in order to do business with higher education institutions, vendors must supply products which meet established standards for digital accessibility.

In April 2024, the Department of Justice (DOJ) updated the regulations in Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act to specifically reference compliance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 for public institutions. In May 2024, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) updated the regulations for Section 504 of the U.S Rehabilitation Act to reference WCAG 2.1. Section 504 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in any program or activity that receives federal financial assistance. Additionally, DOJ and HHS restate that the ADA, Section 504, and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act, have long been interpreted as creating requirements around digital accessibility. In some circumstances, some public institutions may also be required to meet Section 508 of the U.S Rehabilitation Act, such as for some grant-awarded projects and in instances where an institution's state requires compliance.

Conforming alternate versions and work-arounds

In the past, it was sometimes permissible for vendors to provide alternative versions of their products ("conforming alternate versions") to meet accessibility requirements. It was also permissible for universities to create a work-around for some inaccessible vendor products if a person with disabilities needed to use them. As an example, a publisher's PDF of a textbook might be inaccessible because text-to-speech technology (software that a blind or neurodivergent person might use to have content read to them) cannot access it. But someone at the university might scan the PDF into a standard text form and paste it into a Word document, which could then be read.

The April 2024 ADA regulation updates significantly limit the situations in which universities can use conforming alternate versions or provide work-arounds to using vendor-provided products that have accessibility issues. This means that "accessible versions" of websites, applications, or documents often do not meet the current standard.

In rare instances where postsecondary institutions can use conforming alternate versions, there are strict requirements. These restrictions may make providing conforming alternate versions infeasible in many cases. Additionally, suppliers have indicated that it is resource intensive to build and maintain two separate but equal versions of their product. For these reasons, postsecondary institutions typically look for products that are already demonstrably accessible and that do not rely on university or vendor remediation, retrofitting, or the maintenance of two versions of the product.

What the laws specify

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The Rehabilitation Act applies to federal agencies and federally funded programs. It is an extension of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Section 504 prohibits discrimination based on disability in any program or activity operated by a federal agency or by recipients of federal funds. For universities, this is largely through federal student aid. This requires that universities provide disabled individuals an equal opportunity to participate in their programs and benefit from their services, including the provision of information to employees and members of the public.

Section 508 requires Federal agencies to ensure that persons with disabilities (both employees and members of the public) have comparable access to and use of electronic information technology. Section 508 set up standards for whether or not a violation occurred, currently based on the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0. Section 508 compliance may be required by postsecondary institutions in certain states or in cases where a postsecondary institution is receiving funding from specific grant-making agencies.

In May 2024 the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published a rule to the Federal Register updating the Section 504 regulations. These new regulations create more specific requirements for digital accessibility in alignment with the requirements the Department of Justice (DOJ) created in April 2024. Section 504 now requires meeting both WCAG 2.1 A and AA. Postsecondary institutions and health systems that receive federal financial assistance will be expecting vendors to provide products that comply with these requirements.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), sometimes also referred to as the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA), as amended in 2008, applies mainly to the public sector, while the Rehabilitation Act applies to federal agencies and federally funded programs.

Title II of the ADA prohibits discrimination based on disability by public entities, regardless of whether they receive federal financial assistance. The Department of Justice and Department of Education recently issued a Dear Colleague letter to university presidents, clarifying their institution's obligations around digital accessibility. The Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (ED's OCR) have described the Americans with Disabilities Act as applying to digital products since the late 1990's.

In April 2024 the Department of Justice provided updated regulations for Title II of the ADA, requiring practically complete compliance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 Level AA by 2026. ED's OCR has formed a National Digital Accessibility Team to proactively audit and respond to complaints of digital accessibility violations by higher education institutions. Both the DOJ and ED regulate for digital accessibility violations under the ADA, and vendor-provided products, websites, and services are not exempted from postsecondary institutions. In fact, the DOJ explicitly states that postsecondary institutions must procure accessible technology.

Summary

- The Rehabilitation Act and the ADA have long mandated the responsibility of postsecondary institutions to provide accessible digital products. Recent publications have clarified and strengthened these mandates.
- Your potential customers have no choice but to be emphatic about the need for the products that they purchase to meet accessibility guidelines.
- Vendor proactivity around accessibility will greatly facilitate your ability to respond to customer questions and RFPs with assurance that your products will meet or exceed their legal obligations.

Disability and Technology

Key Points

- Different users interact with tools and technologies in different ways
- Some users may use assistive technologies
- Universal Design benefits users without and without disabilities

Disability Personas

As defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), an individual with a disability has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, is a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or is a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.

Some examples of disabilities:

- Blindness and low vision
- Deafness and hard-of-hearing
- Speech
- Neurodivergence (including mental health, cognitive disability, Autism, etc.)

A disability can affect a person's daily functions such as:

- Seeing
- Hearing
- Thinking
- Learning
- Moving
- Mental health
- Remembering
- Communicating
- Social relationships

Assistive Technology

Assistive technology includes software, hardware, and other tools to help disabled individuals use standard computing equipment.

Some types of assistive technology are:

- Screen reading software for blind users, which typically uses synthesized speech or braille output to represent a computer's user interface and substitutes the mouse with keyboard interactions. Examples include JAWS, VoiceOver, NVDA, Orca, and Talkback.
- Screen magnification software allows people to enlarge the display's content, mouse and text cursors; adjust the display's contrast; apply color filters; and provide basic screen reading or text-to-speech functions.

- Text to speech software reads aloud text from documents, web pages, and off the screen. Typically, the word or phrase being read aloud is simultaneously highlighted to aid in visual tracking.
- Speech recognition technology helps individuals who are physically not able to type or use the mouse. It can also be beneficial to people who have difficulty with spelling or other writing skills.

For an IT product or service to be considered equitably accessible with assistive technology, users using assistive technologies must be able to access and use all the same benefits, information, functionality, and interactions as someone who does not use assistive technology.

Just as your product evolves to stay competitive in the market, assistive technologies improve to meet the demands of their customers. Keeping pace with trends in assistive technology can alert you to more accessibility potential as you improve your product. Vendors are encouraged to be aware of types of assistive technology, and to integrate testing with assistive technology into their workflows. There are many free and open source products which may be used to assist with this type of testing. Your customers can let you know what products their students and staff are using.

Universal Design

Accessibility is about more than simply complying with standards. It is about developing solutions to meet the needs of all users. Applying universal design principles helps address and improve accessibility in areas such as digital strategy, procurement, and the design and implementation of digital products.

Through universal design, you will:

- Save money and staff time by creating accessible products from the start;
- Leverage your accessibility efforts to create products that are attractive to all users;
- Ensure that postsecondary institutions will be able to adopt your products without violating federal, internal, and other requirements;
- Enhance the usability of your products for everyone.

A good example of universal design includes considering the steady increase in Internet usage by elders. This is likely to escalate as a large percentage of existing Internet users age, including postsecondary students, instructors, and staff. There are mild accessibility preferences that almost all older users will have, such as high color

contrast and reasonably sized fonts. Since disability incidence tends to increase within an aging population, the larger number of users with moderate to major access needs will also need to be considered.

Summary

- Practicing digital accessibility as part of your regular work creates a more usable, inclusive digital environment.
- By making your digital technology and content accessible, a person with a disability has access to the same information, the ability to engage in the same interactions, and can enjoy the same services and benefits as a person without a disability.

Institutional Accessibility Standards

Key Points

- U.S. universities are looking for conformance with digital accessibility standards
- The usual standard is the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 or 2.2 (WCAG; sometimes referred to as WCAG 2.x).

University Requirements

An overwhelming majority of U.S. universities require or recommend conformance with accessibility standards for digital technology. In some cases, institutions are required to maintain accessibility policy and standards as part of a mediated agreement, arbitration, or other complaint resolution.

Vendors can distinguish their product in the higher education marketplace by providing technology that meets or exceeds common, widely accepted accessibility standards, such as WCAG 2.1.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)

Authored and maintained by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), WCAG is widely recognized as the prevailing worldwide standard for digital accessibility. As of December 2022, WCAG version 2.1 is the most current formal recommendation of the W3C. WCAG 2.2 was finalized on October 5, 2023, and is increasingly being adopted.

WCAG consists of 13 guidelines for accessibility, each of which is supported by testable success criteria. The guidelines are organized into three compliance levels: A, AA (double-A), and AAA (triple-A). Each level addresses a set of accessibility issues based on their potential impact on end users. The guidelines may be applied to a wide variety of technologies. Each guideline contains Success Criteria (SC) which are individually testable criteria that technologies should meet to be considered compliant with the WCAG standard. The most common implementations of WCAG is version 2.1 at Level AA (which includes all Level A and AA criteria). WCAG 2.2 is expected to have increased usage in 2024, as large technology companies update their protocols for accessible development.

WCAG forms the basis for other standards and regulations worldwide, including:

- Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which references WCAG 2.0 AA (United States)
- Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, which references WCAG 2.0 AA (Canada)
- EN 301 549, which references WCAG 2.1 AA (Europe)

In addition to web content, WCAG is widely applied to a variety of digital technologies including software, non-web documents, non-web applications, and mobile apps. Many content authoring platform vendors include guidelines that content creators/authors can use to create accessible documents and media using their products.

Summary

- Vendors should ensure that their technology products meet applicable accessibility standards adopted by institutions of higher education.
- Implementation of WCAG, Section 508, and other state and local standards can help vendors meet the accessibility requirements of their customer base.

Further Reading

[W3C. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) Version 2.2.](#)

Documenting Accessibility

Key Points

- The Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) and the Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment (HECVAT) Toolkit are two common documents for communicating your product's accessibility
- Providing detailed and accurate information using these forms and supplemental documents will greatly facilitate accessibility reviews of your products.
- Third party vendors can help you fill out these forms; choose them wisely.

Overview

In many cases, institutions will require accessibility documentation when acquiring new technologies. Vendors can distinguish their products in the higher education marketplace by providing detailed, accurate documentation of their accessibility status.

Two documents for sharing accessibility information are now widely recognized throughout higher education: the Voluntary Product Accessibility Template/Accessibility Conformance Report (VPAT/ACR) and the Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment Toolkit (HECVAT). Version 3.0 and after of the HECVAT include accessibility questions. Each of these instruments allows the vendor to report on their product's accessibility. Vendors should also document accessibility information not covered in the VPAT/ACR or HECVAT.

Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) / Accessibility Conformance Report (ACR)

The Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) is an industry standard document for vendors to document the accessibility of their product. Vendors complete the document by recording their product's conformance to common accessibility standards and guidelines, including the Revised Section 508 Standards, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), and the European Standard EN 301 549.

Completion of the VPAT yields an Accessibility Conformance Report (ACR) that potential customers can review as part of the procurement process. Note that the acronyms VPAT and ACR are often used interchangeably, though ACR may be used to describe various pieces of accessibility documentation.

The VPAT is applicable for a wide variety of technologies. Vendors can generate ACRs for:

- Web sites, applications, and content
- Non-web digital documents
- Software
- Support documentation and service
- Streaming video and audio

Vendors are strongly encouraged to provide an ACR for all of their digital product offerings. Although anyone can create ACRs based on the VPAT, it is recommended that vendors obtain ACRs from a reputable third party to ensure detailed, accurate reports. Some vendors also maintain ACR documentation through their internal accessibility teams and update that documentation on a product by product basis at regular intervals.

Note: VPATs created using VPAT version 1 do not address current accessibility standards. Vendors should complete ACRs using the most recent VPAT version. The most recent VPAT versions include different templates to account for various standards, including Section 508, EN 301 549, WCAG 2.2, and WCAG INT, which includes all of the previous 3 standards.

[Learn more about VPAT](#) from the Information Technology Industry Council, which maintains the VPAT standard.

Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment Toolkit (HECVAT)

The Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment Toolkit is a detailed questionnaire designed to capture and score a variety of factors concerning the suitability of a particular product or vendor. HECVAT version 3.0 and on lets vendors report security and accessibility information in a standard format for institutions to review during the procurement process. Note that if you provide a HECVAT version prior to 3.0 in response to accessibility procedures, you may receive a request to provide an updated HECVAT, answer an internal questionnaire, or provide a VPAT.

The accessibility section of the HECVAT includes nine questions to measure both the vendor's accessibility practices and the accessibility of a given product. Additional accessibility questions have also been added to the General Information and Documentation sections of the questionnaire. Vendors are encouraged to complete and offer a HECVAT, including accessibility questions, with their digital products.

Note: Vendors should include complete and accurate accessibility information in their new or updated HECVAT or HECVAT Lite documentation.

[Learn more about the HECVAT assessment framework.](#)

Third Party Accessibility Reviews

You may wish to have a [third party company that specializes in accessibility reviews](#) evaluate your products and fill out your VPATs or HECVATs. Note: this list of vendors is not specifically endorsed by the BTAA or any member institutions, but instead is included to demonstrate the widespread availability of these services.

The following are strategies to ensure that you are selecting a good provider:

- Ask your professional peers for recommendations
- Ask candidate companies for sample VPATs or HECVATs that they have created. These samples should be fully filled out and include detailed information on why features are or are not in compliance with WCAG or other standards..
- Ask candidate companies the following questions:
 - How long have you been in business?
 - Do you have assistive technology users who perform testing with products to ensure compatibility?
 - (if appropriate) Our product has many complex features. Do you have experience reviewing similar types of products?

- What guarantees do you provide? For example, if one or more of your findings are challenged by our customers, how will you respond?
- Do you provide any other services, such as remediation assistance?
 - Beware of companies that provide or promote overlays (also called widgets or shims) as an accessibility fix; these are proven to be ineffective, and may cause other problems such as security gaps.

Common Questions Customers May Ask You

Vendors should provide any additional accessibility information in an organized and proactive manner. Consider preparing answers and documentation for the following questions:

- What standards do you apply when considering the accessibility of your product?
- Who is your company's accessibility contact? How can customers provide feedback on accessibility issues?
- How does your company incorporate accessibility into its product lifecycle? Will updates or new versions impact the accessibility of your product?
- Will you provide a functional instance of your product for accessibility testing? Can you share any results of accessibility testing? Can someone in your company demonstrate your product using assistive technology?
- Are there known accessibility or compliance issues with your product? What remedies will your company provide for accessibility issues discovered after the procurement process is complete?
- We received a report of X issue. Here is documentation which demonstrates the issue. How soon will this be fixed?

Summary

- Accurate, detailed information regarding the accessibility of your product adds value to your customers by helping them understand how your product meets their regulatory, legal, policy, or other requirements.
- By demonstrating a commitment to accessibility, vendors can simplify and expedite accessibility reviews associated with the procurement process.

Maintaining Accessibility After the Sale

Key Points

- Maintain products that meet accessibility standards through active and ongoing processes as updates are released, technology changes, and products evolve.
- Create and follow your accessibility roadmap.
- Track and resolve accessibility bugs in a timely manner for current users to have effective access to their education.

Overview

All universities are required to provide accessible experiences to their current users, who, particularly if they are taking courses or performing work tasks, need to be able to complete their work on a very fixed timeline. As a supplier of a vended product(s), it is critical that the products that you sell and maintain are functionally accessible throughout the lifecycle. Universities cannot fix your product for you and relying on workarounds is not a compliant approach. Additionally, university accessibility staff often have to maintain knowledge of the accessibility of hundreds of products, making it important that vendors provide updated accessibility information and sustain accessibility initiatives and work in their products.

It is common for today's purchases to contain contract language for remediating deficiencies, maintaining accessibility over the life of the contract, and following through on accessibility roadmaps. While there is a lot of focus on standards, testing tools, and audits/complaints, postsecondary institutions are ultimately looking for functionally accessible experiences for their users that provide equitable access to education and other experiences that the university offers. Thus, it is the demonstrated dedication, implementation, and ongoing support for accessibility that ultimately determines the real-world success of the product/service and the partnership with the university.

Start Building from the Purchasing Process

Product and development teams can demonstrate their commitment to accessibility through an integrated approach that begins with the purchasing process and continues after the sale.

Sales and contract teams should share accessibility issues, evaluation results, implementation plans, and university questions gathered as part of the proposal with leadership, development, product, and support teams.

If a roadmap with a timeline was not already developed as part of the purchasing process, now is an excellent time to do that and get buy-in from leadership. If it is not possible to address all issues right away, being transparent and making a concrete plan available is critical for documenting your commitment to accessibility. If existing accessibility issues were identified, those should be filed as product bugs and prioritized.

Everyone's role should include general knowledge of and attention to accessibility but identify key accessibility team leaders and ensure they have the necessary professional development and connections to the field to maintain accessibility knowledge and make key decisions.

Establishing Accessibility Processes

Provide users and university support staff with up-to-date accessibility documentation, including known issues and minimum requirements. It is best to make this documentation available on a permanent webpage so campus knowledge bases (KBs) can link directly to this documentation instead of duplicating it. Also, make sure this information appears in context in the product where users can readily find it.

Provide a clear, accessible, easy-to-find way for university reps and end users to report issues and barriers. Collect enough information about the user and their technology to be able to pin-point issues. Make sure you have mechanisms to label accessibility issues in your ticketing system so that these issues can be prioritized, retrieved, and reported.

Establish parameters for prioritizing reported accessibility issues and consider them bug reports rather than future functionality. The volume of accessibility issues reported is not a good indicator of priority, as one student encountering a substantial accessible barrier is one too many users who do not have effective access to their education and puts your customers (universities) in jeopardy.

Regularly test for accessibility, particularly in advance of major releases. Make sure new features are accessible from launch and updates to existing features do not break existing accessibility functionality.

If your product offers content authoring functionality, include information on how university staff, faculty, or students can create accessible content.

Anticipate Evolving Technology and Accessibility Standards

Technology and accessibility will change over time, along with your product. This includes the development tools you use, delivery mechanisms like web browsers, and users' assistive technology. This is normal and expected. It is not moving the goalposts.

Use open standards to ensure compatibility with the widest range of technology and ensure that frameworks and templates used are accessible. It is not typically appropriate to require a specific assistive technology or browser, but it is okay to set minimum supported operating systems, assistive technology versions, or browser versions. If your product development process applies standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1, then it should be widely usable by assistive technologies that are supported to use on modern operating systems.

Hold focus and user group sessions with representative campuses to keep communication channels open and to discover early what some of the changes and barriers are. Some vendors provide accessibility groups for universities or other customers to provide structured feedback to product teams. This can also be a time to vet innovative approaches that extend beyond current best practices and standards. Please recognize that universities should not need to perform your accessibility testing for you.

Provide an open communication channel with campuses and monitor listservs for issues. Universities want to share this information for the benefit of users and their partner companies but need an easy way to do so that gets results. Remember that with the shift to vendor and hosted solutions, universities do not have access to make code changes, so they are dependent on you to make timely fixes. It may also be important to advise university customers when customizations to products may interfere with regular updates that product teams make, including to accessibility.

Summary

It is easy to view the product sale as the final point at which you need to address accessibility. However, maintaining accessibility is an active and ongoing process that universities need and expect from you. Vendors should:

- Actively build accessibility into their design and testing process to provide products that are as accessible as possible when first released.
- Create and follow accessibility roadmaps in a timely manner, which may include remediating issues that were identified during the purchasing process
- Support campuses and users by maintaining accessible products through the lifecycle, including continuing to user test, implementing timely fixes for accessibility bugs, and updating documentation.

Using this guidance, universities and vendors can become strong partners in delivering technology that supports accessible experiences for all users.

Credits

Authors

- Greg Hanek, Indiana University
- Jane Berliss-Vincent, University of Michigan
- Kurt Murmers, University of Michigan
- Laura Grady, University of Wisconsin
- Leah Bowers, University of Wisconsin
- Maria Dahman, University of Wisconsin
- Phil Deaton, University of Michigan
- Philip Voorhees, Penn State University
- TM Weissenberger, University of Iowa
- Todd Schwanke, University of Wisconsin

Reviewers

- Amy Drayer, University of Minnesota
- Elizabeth York, Rutgers University
- Scott Spicer, University of Minnesota
- Sunshine Carter, University of Minnesota