

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

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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

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

The Accessibility Business Case

Key Points

The return on investment

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.

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In April 2024, the Department of

What the laws specify

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The

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.

The Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment Toolkit is

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 the 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 o
 accessibility information
 accessibility information

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.

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.

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