WHY ACCESSIBLE UX MATTERS

Tips for delivering a great user experience

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AUTHORS

Jody Ahlm

Yana Beranek

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In this paper, we explore why and how brands should pursue developing accessible user experiences and highlight a recent case study on the online job seeking experience for users with disabilities.

WHY IS ACCESSIBLE UX IMPORTANT FOR MY BRAND?

As accessibility becomes a bigger part of discussions around user experience (UX), you may be wondering how accessibility is relevant to your product or brand, or how to get stakeholder buy-in for accessibility projects.

There are at least three major reasons for making accessibility a UX priority:

1. THE PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE LIVING WITH A DISABILITY WILL INCREASE AS POPULATIONS AGE

One in six people[1] globally are estimated to experience significant disability and that number is growing. An untold number of people live with disabilities like vision, hearing and mobility impairments that they don't recognise as disabilities because they have developed through the ageing process. These impairments impact how people use products and especially how they interact with the digital world.

Text that seemed large enough and clear enough ten years ago becomes difficult to read. Common conditions like arthritis change our preferences for the size and shape of the devices we use, and the ease with which we can use them.

Declining birth rates and increasing life expectancy mean that, by 2030, one in six people will be over 60[2]. Simultaneously, older generations are embracing more digital technology. Assumptions about who you should be designing for must shift along with these changing realities. Ipsos' What the Future webinar focused on ageing[3] explores this, arguing that new and emerging technologies will be central to the experience of ageing, especially given the shortage of human caregivers and increasing interest in "ageing in place" (growing older at home).

Issues of accessibility are not just problems for people who are ageing or permanently disabled. Whether through illness or injury, many people experience "temporary disability" during their life. This means that, at any moment in time, the number of people who may benefit from assistive technology far exceeds the number of people who identify as disabled.

2. PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES REPRESENT A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF DISPOSABLE INCOME

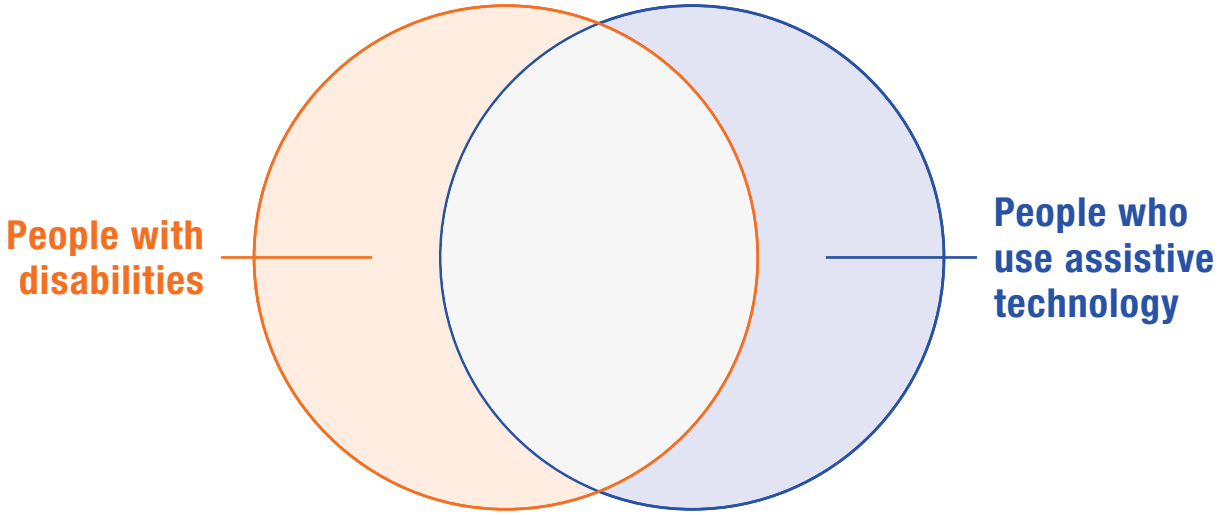
The disabled community and their family and friends are estimated to represent over $13 trillion globally in annual disposable income[4]. Companies are starting to realise and tap into this market opportunity by incorporating more inclusively designed products and services. Research indicates that those that do so can expect to experience an increase in market share[5].

User experience implicitly conveys a brand's values. **An accessible UX signals to users that you value inclusivity.** Across industries and product types, we have found in our research that users notice when a brand is attuned to diversity and inclusion, even if those aspects or features are not relevant to them personally.

3. ACCESSIBLE UX IS GOOD UX

Simpler UX is more accessible UX. Creating accessible UX does not have to be in tension with creating good UX for the presumed "standard" user. In fact, **designing for an edge case (a situation that deviates from the typical user experience) often automatically benefits all users.** Ipsos refers to this as, "Innovate from the margins to design for the masses"[6]. Speech-to-text capabilities are an excellent example. This technology makes it possible for people with certain physical disabilities to input text without using a keyboard. Speech-to-text also makes it possible for anyone to send texts when their hands are busy – a useful feature for a lot of people.

Figure 1: Many, but not all, users of assistive technology identify as disabled



DESIGNING TO SUPPORT ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

When we talk about accessible UX, we are mostly referring to making an experience accessible to people who use assistive technology.

In simple terms, assistive technology generally solves user needs in two ways:

1. Software tools turn something visual into something audio. These tools help people with low or no vision and people who have certain cognitive disabilities such as dyslexia or dyscalculia (trouble recognising or understanding numbers). For websites and apps, screen readers such as Jaws, NVDA, and Apple VoiceOver are some of the most common assistive technologies.

2. The other common assistive technologies turn audio into something visual. These speech recognition tools, like Dragon NaturallySpeaking, are essential tools for users unable to operate a mouse or keyboard, whether due to paralysis, or any condition affecting the use of their hands or arms.

To work well, sites and apps need to be coded in the development process to support those technologies, otherwise the screen reader won't be able to interpret the content and features for the user. Testing the usability of the design with users of these devices will help uncover common accessibility issues.

Our Ipsos UX team recently conducted research on how people with disabilities experience online job seeking, illustrating the importance of design and testing with people with disabilities. In the process, we uncovered five key ways to make usability testing with people with disabilities successful.

FIVE TIPS FOR CONDUCTING ACCESSIBILITY RESEARCH

1. Do your homework

Build trust by taking the time to learn about the common barriers faced by the types of users you want to do research with, and the assistive technologies they use.

2. Avoid reducing users to their disability

Keep invasive, unnecessary medical questions out of your screeners and focus on the assistive technology they use to qualify participants.

3. Expect to spend more time (and money)

Plan for more time to prepare for fieldwork, and to conduct the sessions. People with disabilities may take longer to complete tasks and can fatigue more quickly so pace your sessions to suit their needs.

4. Don't filter out professional testers

Many people with disabilities work part-time or full-time as usability consultants or testers, and assistive technology users overall tend to be experts with their technology because they have to be. Their experience can make it easier to get to the root cause of accessibility issues in the user experience.

5. Make accommodations

You will need to do some things differently. Make sure your recruitment, participation, and incentive processes are accessible from start to finish. Adjust your moderation style to fit the flow of any assistive technology being used.

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CASE STUDY: HOW DO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES EXPERIENCE THE ONLINE JOB SEARCH?

> The United Nations estimates that the unemployment rate for people with disabilities in industrialised countries is between 50% and 70%, nearing 80% or 90% in developing countries. ”

Our Ipsos UX team recently conducted internal research on the online job search experience for people with disabilities. We invited participants to describe their job search process and attempt to find and apply for relevant jobs on a popular online job platform.

We pursued this research because of the chronic unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities. The United Nations estimates that the unemployment rate for people with disabilities in industrialised countries is between 50% and 70%, nearing 80% or 90% in developing countries[7]. Making sure the online job search and application process is accessible has huge implications for the wellbeing and security of people with disabilities.

In our research, we talked to three types of users: those who use screen readers to navigate, those who use voice control software to navigate, and d/Deaf or hard of hearing users.

THREE KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE RESEARCH

1.

Searching and applying for jobs is uniquely time consuming for assistive tech users

People with disabilities must navigate additional, time consuming issues related to the lack of accessibility, starting with searching for posts online through the interview and negotiation stages. People who use screen readers or voice control software frequently encounter application forms that are inaccessible and abandon the application process for jobs they are qualified to do.

2.

Information about accommodations is important to users, and hard to find

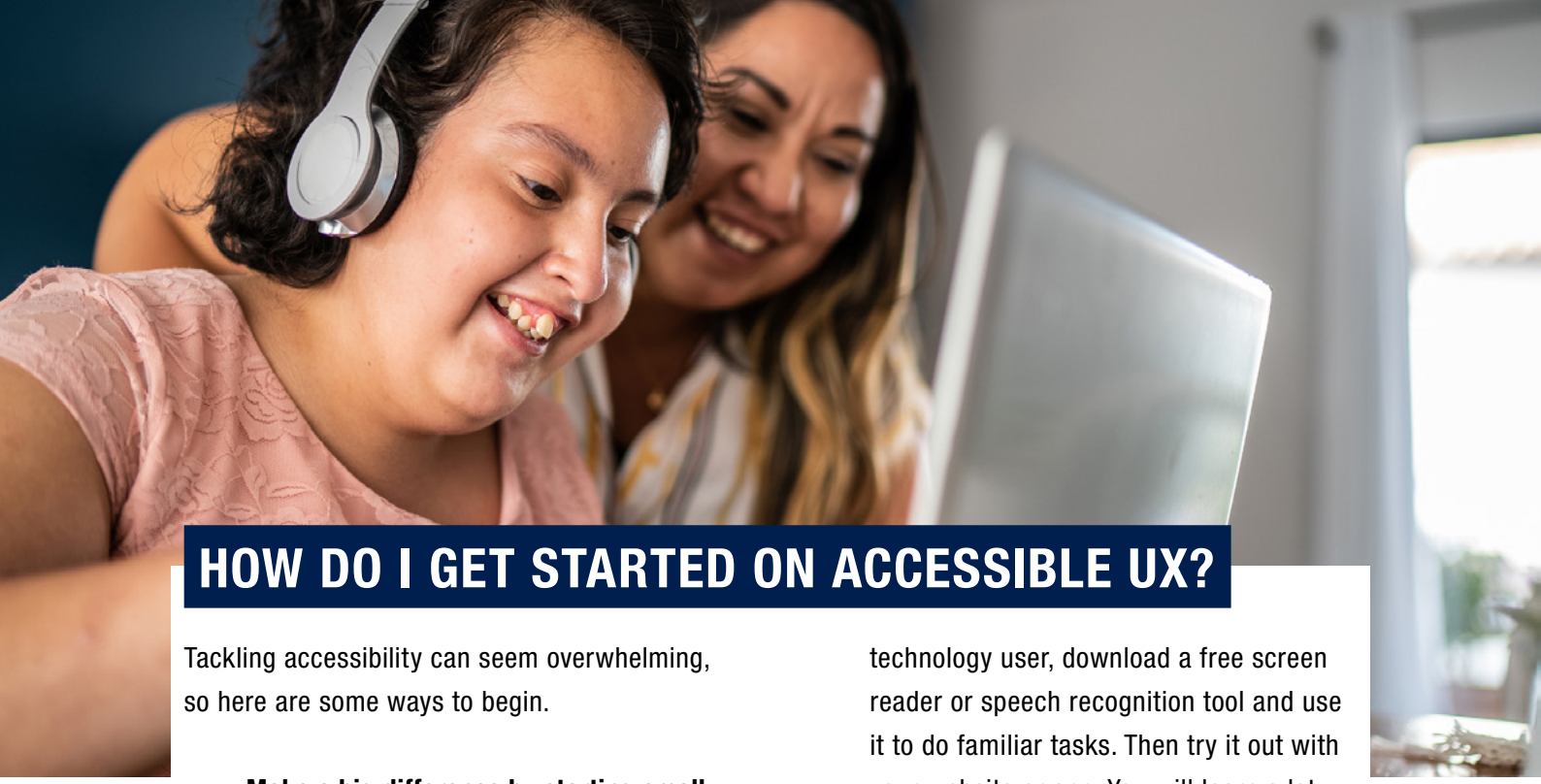
We discovered that job seekers with disabilities have unique content needs that are not being met. Participants were not confident that the boiler-plate legalese around non-discrimination and workplace accommodations would actually translate into an accessible hiring process or workplace. Users would like to see specific language describing how the employer will provide accommodations before taking the time to apply.

3.

Simpler is better

The site we tested had a complex page layout with side-by-side panes separated by scroll bars. For a sighted-user, the multi-pane design allows for quick scanning between search results and job details, but this design creates friction for users of assistive tech. Screen readers and speech recognition tools use linear logic to read down and across a page or via a grid overlay. The design of this site was difficult for the assistive tech tools to navigate and created confusion for the users.

Most participants volunteered that they preferred the app over the website for accessibility reasons. Apps tend to have less content, a simpler layout, and allow the user to focus on fewer tasks at one time.



HOW DO I GET STARTED ON ACCESSIBLE UX?

Tackling accessibility can seem overwhelming, so here are some ways to begin.

- **Make a big difference by starting small.** Small pilot studies are a great way to get started with accessibility UX research. Talking to a few people who have a disability that affects how, or if, they use your product will reveal new ways of thinking about usability and provide a foundation for incorporating accessibility into your product roadmap. The key here is *who,* rather than *how many* users, you talk to.

- **Try out assistive technology yourself.** If you are not already an assistive technology user, download a free screen reader or speech recognition tool and use it to do familiar tasks. Then try it out with your website or app. You will learn a lot about existing pain points and be better prepared when you start doing research with assistive tech users.

- **Avoid trying to fix everything at once.** You may find a lot of room for improvement as you dive into making your products more accessible. Identify the things that will have the highest impact for your users relative to the effort and resources required from your team or business.

HOW IPSOS CAN HELP

Our UX team has experience conducting user testing with people who use assistive technology. We have conducted in-person and remote in-depth interviews with users with a variety of disabilities, including blind and low-vision users, d/Deaf or hard of hearing users and users with cognitive impairments.

We have also put together accessibility panels for multiple clients, providing them with a community of participants tailored to answering their questions about accessibility and supporting them by designing and conducting research with those users.

Please get in touch if you would like to learn more about our services related to accessible UX research and design. You can view our full range of UX capabilities here: https://www.ipsos.com/en/envisioning-future-user-experiences

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AUTHORS

Jody Ahlm, Senior UX Researcher, Ipsos in North America

Yana Beranek, Global Head of UX, Ipsos

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