Accessibility: Front and Center

Earlier in my career, I had the privilege of working closely with two faculty members who cared deeply about issues of universal design. They came from different but complementary perspectives. One was a professor of special education, and the other was a professor of occupational therapy. It took me years of working and talking with them (I was their Assistant Dean), but I finally “got it”: good design intended to benefit those with special needs improves the effectiveness of software and digital content for everyone.

This did not come easily for me, in part because my listening skills had not evolved to the level needed to be fully effective. In other words, I thought that I knew far more than I really did. I’d like to share here what finally got my attention, in the hope that others might be able to skip a few of the more painful missteps I took on my journey to awareness.

Several years ago, I sponsored a project at another campus to deploy web kiosks ubiquitously. The purpose was to provide general access to web services for students, faculty and staff, and visitors. As part of my “leadership” of this project, I cautioned my staff that they should not forget to ensure that at least one kiosk in multi-kiosk locations was accessible. And then I walked away, feeling pleased with myself about my elevated sense of “doing the right thing.” I did not engage deeply to ensure that my staff had subject-matter expertise or at least access to subject-matter expertise. Fast forward: after the project was complete, one of my two faculty friends who had tried to develop my commitment to accessibility issues asked if he could meet with CIO Office leaders and show us a video that some of his students had made as a class project.

It turned out that the video showed a person who was in a wheelchair and was trying to use one of our kiosks. To say the experience of watching this video was painful would be an understatement. I did not look around the room as the video was shown. I can’t attest for everyone else, but partway through the video I realized that I was having a little trouble seeing because of my misty eyes. There were numerous barriers presented to the individual in the wheelchair, even though the kiosk had been installed at “wheelchair height.” Yet the faculty member knew that making the kiosk difficult to use was not our motivation; it was a result of our execution and my own well-intended leadership. He did not lecture us. He simply wanted us to “feel” what the process was like for people who had significant barriers standing in their way.

Compassionately delivered, this message has stuck with me ever since. It is not enough to have good intentions. It was not enough for me to issue some goals and then walk away without providing guidance. It is not enough to retro-fit a project after it has been executed. If you truly respect all members of your campus community, you need to get services right the first time.

What does this mean? I suggest four action items:

- **Action item 1.** When meeting with vendors of software that is delivered through the web, and when hiring web developers, let them know that your institution is committed to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and give them the WCAG link so that they can learn more: http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag. The standard for accessibility of content on the web, WCAG states that its goal is to provide “a single shared standard for web content accessibility that meets the needs of individuals, organizations, and governments internationally.”

- **Action item 2.** When meeting with software vendors, inform them that your institution expects products to be designed, from the outset, with the Section 508 Amendment to the Rehabilitation Act in mind (https://www.section508.gov). Let them know that this is not optional but is a basic expectation of your institution.

- **Action item 3.** When meeting with publishers, tell them that you expect content to be delivered in a way that is compatible with the twelve guidelines of WCAG 2.0 (http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG/#contents). These twelve guidelines are organized under four principles: perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust. Let publishers know that you also expect adherence to evolving standards (WCAG 3.0 is emerging now) and encourage them to engage in the dialogue as new standards develop.

- **Action item 4.** When chartering a project, ensure that best practices related to accessibility—and consultation/engagement with true subject-matter experts on your campus—are baked in to the requirements and the project plan.

Getting things right the first time is all about requirements and design. Yes, in the beginning we will still need to do some retrofitting as we build awareness and a culture of “no compromise” moving forward. This requires that we work together respectfully as we transition toward a future in which accessible design is a normal part of what we and our partners do as we create new innovations. The Internet2 NET+ initiative (http://www.internet2.edu/netplus/) is the perfect laboratory for us to do this because their leadership demonstrably...
cares about accessibility, and the I2 community has the scale to influence the marketplace. In addition, we in libraries and information technology need to engage with the campus office that represents those who need our services to be accessible. We must move beyond good intentions into purposeful action with real subject-matter experts. Doing so will result in what it has taken me years to learn: designing for those with special needs results in services that are better designed for everyone. And ultimately, we will spend less of our precious budgets by doing it right, from the beginning.

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