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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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ACCESSIBILITY FOR EVERYONE

3 PLANNING FOR ACCESSIBILITY

INCORPORATING ACCESSIBILITY FROM the beginning is almost always easier, more effective, and less expensive than making accessibility improvements as a separate project. In fact, building accessibility into your project and processes has a wealth of business benefits. If you're looking to make the case for accessibility—to yourself, to coworkers, or to bosses and clients—you might start here:

- **Findability and ease of use:** In the broadest terms, accessibility can make it easier for anyone to find, access, and use a website successfully. By ensuring better usability for all, accessibility boosts a site's effectiveness and increases its potential audience.
- **Competitive edge:** The wider your audience, the greater your reach and commercial appeal. When a site is more accessible than other sites in the same market, it can lead to preferential treatment from people who struggled to use competitors' sites. If a site is translated, or has more simply written content that improves automated translation,

increased accessibility can lead to a larger audience by reaching people who speak other languages.

- **Lower costs:** Accessible websites can cut costs in other areas of a business. On a more accessible site, more customers can complete more tasks and transactions online, rather than needing to talk to a representative one-to-one.
- **Legal protection:** In a few countries, an accessible site is required by law for organizations in certain sectors—and organizations with inaccessible sites can be sued for discrimination against people with disabilities.

Once you've made the case for incorporating accessibility into your work, the next step is to integrate an accessibility mindset into your processes. Include accessibility by default by giving accessibility proper consideration at every step in a product's lifecycle.

BUILDING YOUR TEAM

Web accessibility is the responsibility of everyone who has a hand in the design of a site. Design includes all of the decisions we make when we create a product—not just the pretty bits, but the decisions about how it works and who it's for. This means everybody involved in the project is a designer of some sort.

Each specialist is responsible for a basic understanding of their work's impact on accessibility, and on their colleagues' work. For example, independent consultant Anne Gibson says that information architects should keep an eye on the markup:

We may or may not be responsible for writing the HTML, but if the developers we're working with don't produce semantic structure, then they're not actually representing the structures that we're building in our designs.

Leadership and support

While we should all be attentive to how accessibility impacts our specialism, it's important to have leadership to help deter-

mine priorities and key areas where the product's overall accessibility needs improvement. Project manager Henny Swan (user experience and design lead at the Paciello Group, and previously of the BBC) recommends that accessibility be owned by product managers. The product managers must consider how web accessibility affects what the organization does, understand the organization's legal duties, and consider the potential business benefits.

Sometimes people find themselves stuck within a company or team that doesn't value accessibility. But armed with knowledge and expertise about accessibility, we can still do good work as individuals, and have a positive effect on the accessibility of a site. For example, a designer can ensure all the background and foreground text colors on their site are in good contrast, making text easier to distinguish and read.

Unfortunately, without the support and understanding of our colleagues, the accessibility of a site can easily be let down in other areas. While the colors could be accessible, if another designer has decided that the body text should be set at 12 pixels, the content will still be hard to read.

When accessibility is instituted as a company-wide practice, rather than merely observed by a few people within a team, it will inevitably be more successful. When everybody understands the importance of accessibility and their role in the project, we can make great websites.

Professional development

When you're just starting to learn about accessibility, people in your organization will need to learn new skills and undertake training to do accessibility well.

Outside experts can often provide thorough training, with course material tailor-made to your organization. Teams can also develop their accessibility skills by learning the basics through web- and book-based research, and by attending relevant conferences and other events.

Both formal training and independent practice will cost time away from other work, but in return you'll get rapid improvements in a team's accessibility skills. New skills might mean

initially slower site development and testing while people are still getting their heads around unfamiliar tools, techniques, and ways of thinking. Don't be disheartened! It doesn't take long for the regular practice of new skills to become second nature.

You might also need to hire in outside expertise to assist you in particular areas of accessibility—it's worth considering the capabilities of your team during budgeting and decide whether additional training and help are needed. Especially when just starting out, many organizations hire consultants or new employees with accessibility expertise to help with research and testing.

When you're trying to find the right expert for your organization's needs, avoid just bashing "accessibility expert" into a search engine and hoping for good luck. Accessibility blogs and informational websites (see the Resources section) are probably the best place to start, as you can often find individuals and organizations who are great at teaching and communicating accessibility. The people who run accessibility websites often provide consultancy services, or will have recommendations for the best people they know.

SCOPING THE PROJECT

At the beginning of a project, you'll need to make many decisions that will have an impact on accessibility efforts and approaches, including:

- What is the purpose of your product?
- Who are the target audiences for your product? What are their needs, restrictions, and technology preferences?
- What are the goals and tasks that your product enables the user to complete?
- What is the experience your product should provide for each combination of user group and user goal?
- How can accessibility be integrated during production?
- Which target platforms, browsers, operating systems and assistive technologies should you test the product on?

If you have answers to these questions—possibly recorded more formally in an accessibility policy (which we’ll look at later in this chapter)—you’ll have something to refer to when making design decisions throughout the creation and maintenance of the product.

Keep in mind that rigid initial specifications and proposals can cause problems when a project involves research and iterative design. Being flexible during the creation of a product will allow you to make decisions based on new information, respond to any issues that arise during testing, and ensure that the launched product genuinely meets people’s needs.

If you’re hiring someone outside your organization to produce your site, you need to convey the importance of accessibility to the project. Whether you’re a project manager writing requirements, a creative agency writing a brief, or a freelance consultant scoping your intent, making accessibility a requirement will ensure there’s no ambiguity. Documenting your success criteria and sharing it with other people can help everyone understand your aims, both inside and outside your organization.

Budgeting

Accessibility isn’t a line item in an estimate or a budget—it’s an underlying practice that affects every aspect of a project.

Building an accessible site doesn’t necessarily cost more money or time than an inaccessible site, but some of the costs are different: it costs money to train your team or build alternative materials like transcripts or translations. It’s wise to consider all potential costs from the beginning and factor them into the product budget so they’re not a surprise or considered an “extra cost” when they could benefit a wide audience. You wouldn’t add a line item to make a site performant, so don’t do it for accessibility either.

If you’ve got a very small budget, rather than picking and choosing particular elements that leave some users out in favor of others, consider the least expensive options that enable the widest possible audience to access your site. For example, making a carousel that can be manipulated using only the keyboard

will only benefit people using keyboard navigation. On the other hand, designing a simpler interface without a carousel will benefit everyone using the site.

Ultimately, the cost of accessibility depends on the size of the project, team, and whether you're retrofitting an existing product or creating a new product. The more projects you work on, the better you'll be able to estimate the impact and costs of accessibility.

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