Designing for Everyone: How the 3 A's Drive Accessibility Transformation

Applying Agility, Adjacencies, Adaptability

POV by

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The Next Applied

Approximately twenty percent of the world's population has one or more types of physical challenges or disabilities. This includes people who are blind, with low vision, deaf, with hearing loss, mobility impairments and cognitive challenges. With so many of us experiencing some form of disability, the practice of accessibility in digital products and services is a moral imperative and a strategic opportunity for transformation. The practice of accessibility helps ensure that people with all abilities can consume and benefit from the digital products and services that we produce.

Although accessibility has been a substantive practice for over 25 years, it is often not reflected in discussions about organizational design maturity and product growth. More often, accessibility is unfairly targeted as an activity that slows down the development process. This article offers a perspective that aligns accessibility with progressive transformation for organizations. It also highlights the ways that design agencies and internal design teams can make substantive improvements for customers and the bottom line. This different mindset can position accessibility as an agent of change.

When talking about 'transformation', there are not many areas of software development that embrace that as much as accessibility. For a person who is blind, accessibility is the difference between access and no access. Without support for screen readers and keyboard-only navigation, the blind user is shut off from the information. A user interface with attention to the size of touch targets can make it possible or not for a person with impaired hand mobility. Well-crafted content and layout are transformational for someone with a cognitive challenge. The effectiveness of screen readers still depends heavily on how well content is structured. For example, text embedded in images without proper alternative text remains inaccessible. Ensuring semantic HTML and proper labeling is foundational to accessibility success.

In the book *Transformation in Times of Crisis: Eight Principles for Creating Opportunities and Value in the Post-Pandemic World*, authors Nitin Rakesh and Jerry Wind offer a detailed and comprehensive set of principles for organizations to consider. As the CEO of Mphasis, Rakesh details the philosophy that drives the multinational information technology and consulting company. That philosophy is divided into eight principles with each representing a different area of focus.

Principle 5 is *"Seize the Need for Speed and Design"*. It is particularly relevant to providing digital accessibility. In it, the authors identify three important elements:

• Agility   • Adjacencies   • Adaptability

The balance of this article addresses each of these elements.

1. Agility

Agility is all about completing activities quickly. Ideally, we want to do everything we can to keep the momentum of an activity going toward a solution. The customers of our products are looking for regular and reliable improvements. Lengthy delays are no longer tolerated in today's marketplace.

We have to recognize that our customers appreciate products that are available when needed and upgraded at dependable intervals. Regardless of the size of our organization or a project, it is possible for individual teams to foster a sense of urgency in completing any number of accessibility tasks and initiatives. If an initiative is too large to be nimble, examine how to break it down into smaller chunks. Accessibility can be reduced to very granular tasks and components. For example, the broad goal of fully supporting screen readers across a product line is time-consuming and complex. However, ensuring that JAWS or NVDA readers are compatible with just one product or service is an improvement. As another example, emerging AI tools make it easier and faster to prototype keyboard-only interactions.

An important element of an agile team is having agile team members. Try to create an environment where your team can quickly grasp new accessibility concepts and swiftly solve problems with them. For example, the Figma design tool has a plug-in ecosystem that includes tools that increase the efficiency of tasks like evaluating color contrast. The cost of trying out new solutions is small compared to the likely savings over time. Foster an environment of curiosity and decisiveness.

Decisiveness does not equate directly with speed. We want to bring strategic awareness into our decision-making. Going back to the Figma color contrast example, a certain plug-in might be an excellent solution for an individual design team. However, your broader organization may have procurement budgets that apply to the whole company. Other teams may have invested in other tools and cross-team compatibility may be an issue. Be mindful of long-term impact and look at potential solutions from different perspectives.

Accessibility can benefit from the agile processes that we use in so many other aspects of development. Individual tasks can be implemented as accessibility-specific sprints or integrated with design sprints. Avoid having accessibility practitioners operate only within their own silos. Instead, make sure they are trained on and brought into the agile processes used by other practitioners. Related to that, encourage and empower your accessibility team to innovate and rapidly execute on their ideas. For example, there are many tools which can be used to check the current accessibility health of a product.

Your goal should be to create a workforce where everyone understands how they contribute to accessibility. One approach to this is role-based education. Not everyone needs to know everything about accessibility. Tailor your training to the portions of accessibility that are directly relevant to the role: interaction designer, researcher, visual designer, content strategist, developer, project manager, etc.

Another blocker that comes up is regulatory compliance. It is a misreading of accessibility compliance to assume that everything has to be perfect before release. That is not practical and actually impedes people with disabilities. Accessibility is best enabled when it is iterative. Every quality addition to accessibility improves the experience of those who rely on it. Lawsuits related to regulatory compliance generally only occur with egregious neglect. An iterative, constantly improving accessibility program insulates organizations from legal jeopardy. An agile organization should be constantly creating and updating transparent documentation about accessibility status and capabilities.

An agile mindset also helps us deal with uncertainty. For example, the European Accessibility Act (EAA) came into force on June 28 of this year. It represents a far-reaching and high level of compliance for all providers of digital products and services in the European Union. Since the new legislation is built upon the prescriptions of the past, an agile approach is to double-down on what we've already been doing. Although associated record-keeping is changing, the core goal of supporting people with disabilities remains the same.

By being more strategic, we can ensure our work has ROI for the organization, compliance and the ethics of doing what is right. This includes watching for gaps in our support. We also want to watch for signs that our work might have some weaknesses. For example, negative feedback directly from customers or from social media can alert us to areas that we need to address.

The most successful accessibility efforts begin early. When accessibility is part of the conversation from the first planning meetings, it becomes embedded in every phase of the project. This proactive approach ensures that accessibility isn't an afterthought. It becomes a core part of the product's foundation.

Encourage cross-functional collaboration. Designers, developers, researchers, testers and project managers all play a role in accessibility. Building a culture of shared learning across these roles helps teams adapt quickly and effectively.

2. Adjacencies

Agility lays the foundation for the second of the 3 A's, which is Adjacency. This is where we take a wider view of our work to see how it contributes to emerging product types and new markets. As companies shift from their core into adjacent spaces, agile practices like rapid iteration, cross-functional teamwork and fast learning cycles become essential. These capabilities help manage the uncertainty and complexity that come with new strategies for new markets and products.

For instance, a company expanding from project management tools into time-tracking apps must rely on agile methods to prototype new features, test market fit and refine its approach. Key accessibility elements like keyboard-only navigation and assigning ARIA landmarks can be assigned to the agile teams doing the prototyping.

Accessibility work can sometimes fall into cycles of repetition. To stay effective, teams must continuously evaluate their strategies, embrace new tools and learn from the broader accessibility community. Innovation thrives when we challenge familiar patterns.

By prioritizing accessibility, organizations can unlock new revenue streams and reach previously excluded customer segments. While accessibility has come a long way in the past 25 years, it is still not top of mind in many, if not most, organizations.

You can use any number of free and subscription-based accessibility evaluation tools to identify products in your periphery that may need help. For internal teams, this can help broaden the message of accessibility in the enterprise and ensure consistency across products. For agencies, this can open up new opportunities for project revenue. For the organizations instituting accessibility, there is the potential return on investment for embracing customers with disabilities. At the same time, there is a reduced risk of legal costs due to compliance issues.

Organizations like Amazon, Microsoft and Apple are all in on accessibility because it is good business.

- Amazon is interested in having everyone be a customer. People with disabilities are highly incentivized to purchase online when it is easy to do so.
- Microsoft sells its services to large enterprises around the world. Their products benefit from being accessible because their corporate customers demand it for their employees with disabilities.
- For Apple, accessibility has made the iPhone the go-to device for people who are blind. Apple provides a highly crafted, comprehensive and accessible experience.

As we explore adjacent markets and experiment with new technologies, we must maintain a balanced approach. Take the time to do an opportunity inventory of your accessibility efforts across your organization. It might open entirely new avenues of business. Accessibility efforts should span both legacy systems and cutting-edge innovations. This dual focus allows organizations to meet current user needs while preparing for future opportunities.

For greenfield projects, accessibility is most effective and cheapest when done from the beginning. Early adoption makes it possible to innovate with accessible design that delights and supports the next generation of customers. For example, NASA's website redesign improved keyboard-only navigation, benefiting users with and without disabilities. Evidence-driven design and user research help uncover unique needs and inspire solutions that are both inclusive and efficient.

While innovation is essential, it's equally important to ensure that our accessibility improvements extend to legacy products. These systems often serve large user bases and may contain critical functionality. Balancing innovation with support for legacy platforms ensures that no users are left behind, especially those who rely on long-standing tools and interfaces. For legacy products, consider where they can be improved within the existing framework.

A mature organization is going to find a way to build accessibility into every environment. This includes ramping up with new markets and products. As our organization grows, we need to make sure accessibility is brought into the conversation in those emerging areas. We may also need to support new distribution areas. For example, an expansion of our product into Canada will require addressing the Accessible Canada Act (ACA).

The treatment of accessibility within AI LLMs is an emerging issue. The astounding growth of these models over the past several years has been amazing. There are robust offerings from Google, Microsoft, OpenAI, Meta, xAI and Anthropic. Yet the representation of accessibility is limited and problematic. This is a new opportunity to work with organizations building LLMs to ensure that disabilities are properly represented.

3. Adaptability

Adaptability is the ability to respond effectively to change, and in accessibility work, change is constant. Whether it's evolving user needs, shifting business priorities or emerging technologies, teams must be ready to adjust their strategies and solutions. As organizations expand into adjacent markets and explore new product opportunities, adaptability becomes the key to sustaining that growth.

The insights gained from evaluating legacy systems, launching greenfield projects and engaging with emerging technologies like AI provide a foundation. But it is adaptability that enables teams to respond to evolving user needs, regulatory landscapes and competitive pressures. By building on the momentum of adjacencies, organizations can continuously refine their accessibility strategies, ensuring that innovation remains inclusive and robust in the face of change.
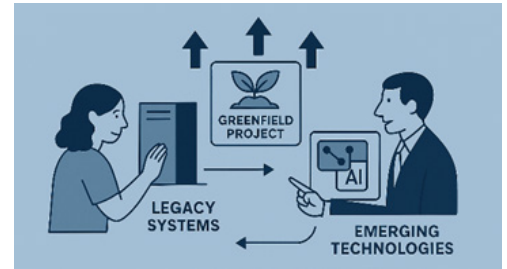
Adaptability also means being able to integrate accessibility practices into any environment. Those environments could be a startup sprint, a large enterprise workflow or a government procurement process. The ability to quickly align accessibility work with diverse operational contexts is key to long-term success. Teams should build the capability to mold their accessibility strategies to fit the unique demands of each environment. This includes understanding organizational culture, technical constraints and user expectations. Flexibility in approach allows accessibility to flourish regardless of context. Accessibility work has the power to positively impact the organizational environment. This includes fostering inclusion, improving team collaboration and aligning with broader DEI goals.

While innovation is essential, it must be balanced with consistency. Accessibility strategies should be reliable and stable, even as new ideas are tested. This ensures that foundational support remains strong while experimentation drives progress.

As mentioned earlier, accessibility is highly iterative. There is always the opportunity to improve on the experience. Most of the focus on disabilities has been on sight, hearing and mobility. In recent years, much needed attention has been paid to cognitive challenges and neurodivergence. These challenges have been elevated in the public consciousness. Attention to them shows your customers and the broader marketplace that you want to make an impact where it counts.

Blink UX recently conducted a study for a client on how AI tools impact neurodivergent individuals, especially those with ADHD, autism and dyslexia. The study found that AI can significantly aid productivity by automating tasks, reducing cognitive load, supporting communication and adapting to individual needs.

For many years, accessibility has been part of broader diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. Society has valued this effort highly. More recently, some organizations have made questionable reductions to their DEI programs. If you are in a situation like this, you may need to adapt to the political realities. While accessibility certainly has DEI values at its core, the strategy and tactics to support people with disabilities can be disengaged from it.

If your organization services large corporate customers, you may find that they have their own preferences about accessibility. Your customers may have accessibility requirements built into software procurement contracts. This is especially true if you are selling into the government. In the United States, federal agencies are legally required by Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act to ensure accessibility. This has carried over to state and municipal requirements. The European Union and nations around the world have their own regulations. If your company wishes to have customers in these areas, you'll need to adapt your accessibility strategy to formally comply.

Depending on your business environment, you may need to react to how your competitors support accessibility. It is worth examining their offerings and identifying whether you are ahead or behind. You may find that a competitor is doing something that you haven't thought about. You may also find that you are exceeding their services. Ideally, your level of accessibility is a positive differentiator.

Projects often face tight deadlines, changing scopes or limited budgets. Adaptability means knowing how to prioritize. Focus on the accessibility fixes that will have the greatest impact. Develop flexible, scalable components

that meet both business goals and user needs. This allows teams to stay responsive without compromising inclusion. For example, having your content designer develop an accessible web page template and style guide can extend that support throughout the organization.

User research is essential to adaptability. It helps teams understand the diverse ways people experience digital products. For example, not all blind users interact with content the same way. Research uncovers these nuances and guides more personalized, effective solutions. Researchers ask questions of customers and then test and validate the findings. Use evidence-based methods like interviews, surveys and usability testing to gather insights. Then apply those findings to support specific needs across vision, hearing, mobility and cognition.

User testing with people with disabilities often reveals unexpected barriers. Adaptability means being open to feedback and willing to revise assumptions. Treat challenges as opportunities to improve, not setbacks. Iterative design leads to more inclusive, resilient solutions. It helps teams move beyond compliance and toward truly user-centered accessibility.

Accessibility standards evolve slowly, but technology moves fast. Staying adaptable means keeping up with both. Familiarize yourself with the latest versions of guidelines like WCAG and the ADA. Participate in community discussions to stay informed about upcoming changes. At the same time, monitor updates to assistive technologies like screen readers, AI tools and operating systems and adjust your testing methods accordingly. This ensures your products remain compatible and effective for all users. As mentioned earlier, AI tools are increasingly capable of generating alternative text for images, offering speed and scalability. However, context matters. Automated descriptions may fall short when nuance is needed. A hybrid approach that combines AI efficiency with human oversight ensures both quality and relevance.

Real-time monitoring tools can enhance adaptability by providing immediate feedback on accessibility performance. These tools help teams identify issues as they arise, enabling faster resolution and continuous improvement.

Accessibility teams should remain alert to emerging opportunities and be willing to pivot when needed. Whether it's new technology or a shift in user behavior, adaptability means being ready to change tracks and explore new solutions. In summary, adaptability empowers teams to stay effective, empathetic and future-ready. It's not just about meeting standards. We want to continuously improve the experience for all users in a rapidly changing digital world.

4. The 3A's Together

As noted by Rakesh and Wind in their book, the best organizations leverage all three of the A's—Agility, Adjacencies and Adaptability so as to drive meaningful transformation.

Accessibility is not just a compliance requirement or a design consideration—it's a strategic advantage. When done well, it expands your audience, deepens engagement and strengthens brand loyalty. Customers with disabilities often influence household purchasing decisions and gift-giving within their communities. Understanding their needs unlocks cross-selling opportunities and increases your share of the wallet.

The broader economic environment also plays a role. In times of financial constraint, demonstrating the ROI of accessibility becomes even more critical. Accessibility supports customer retention, opens new markets and enhances brand value. For example, the aging U.S. population, now 16% over age 65, represents a growing segment with evolving accessibility needs.

Being an accessible product can help bolster your premium brand. It positions you as a leader in your category and industry. But leadership requires investment: in training, in process refinement and in cultivating a workforce that understands its role in accessibility.

Organizations like T-Mobile and Expedia have embraced this by empowering coaches and champions. These are team members who advocate for accessibility and mentor others. Teams in organizations of all sizes can be supported by

tools from accessibility service providers like Deque, Level Access and TPGi. Organizations like Mphasis can integrate accessibility with large-scale change.

Community engagement also matters. Partnering with organizations that support people with disabilities helps you stay informed, conduct meaningful research and build inclusive solutions. Certification bodies like IAAP offer education and validation for your efforts.

As technology evolves, so must our strategies. New devices and AI-powered tools offer fresh opportunities to innovate. This includes speech-to-text, lip reading, scene description and mobility aids. The ability to adapt in times of change is what sets accessibility leaders apart.

Accessibility is not a destination; it's a journey of continuous improvement, empathy and innovation. By embracing agility, adjacencies and adaptability, we go beyond meeting standards. We elevate experiences. Let's lead with intention, design with inclusion and transform the digital world for everyone.
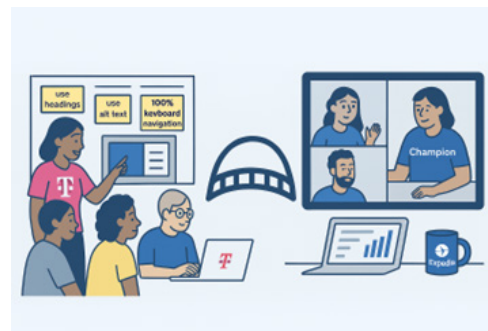
5. Reference

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