Transcript: Before You Spend Another Penny: Bake Accessibility into Your Procurement Process Panel Discussion; Kevin McDaniel, Andy Burstein, Clyde Dupree, Julie Romanowski, and Jennifer Sagalyn. AccessibilityPlus 2022.

Kaela

Welcome to AccessibilityPlus's April 2022 event. Our event today features a panel discussion hosted by Kevin McDaniel and features subject-matter experts on accessibility procurement. Our panelists include Andy Burstein from Accessible Pharmacy, Clyde Dupree from Beyond A11y, Julie Romanowski from Knowbility, and Jennifer Sagalyn from Perkins School for the Blind - Perkins Access. I'm Kaela from Accessibility.com.

I have brown hair and brown eyes and I'm wearing a blue shirt. We are so pleased to have you join us today. Accessibility within an organization is so important and many people don't know where to begin. To help you wrap your head around the concept of how to purchase accessibility-related items for your company, whether that be assistive technology or third party applications, we have a group with varying perspectives to offer you insights. Our panelists' experiences include founding disability-inclusive companies, accessibility-related project management, managing strategic partnerships, and navigating the technical landscape of implementing policies, procedures, and structure. Combined they have over 45 years of accessibility experience. Before we kick off the panel, we'd like to take a moment to thank our sponsors for today's event.

Today's event sponsors include Verbit, the Bureau of Internet Accessibility, and Propeller Media Works. To learn more about our sponsors and how they can assist your organizations, please visit AccessibilityPlus.Live and click on the link for today's event. In the middle of the page there, you will find our link to learn more about our sponsors. Without further ado, please enjoy today's panel discussion on accessibility procurement. We certainly hope you enjoyed today's event.

Kevin McDaniel

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us for today's panel, "Before You Spend Another Penny: Bake Accessibility Into Your Procurement Process." My name is Kevin McDaniel and I'm the Editor-in-Chief for Accessibility.com. And we are so fortunate today to have an extremely knowledgeable and very, very experienced group of panelists today and subject-matter experts in accessibility and procurement.

We're going to start by introducing everybody and just see where the conversation goes. We have a lot to talk about. So, honestly, I really appreciate everybody being here today. Thank you

so much. If you don't mind introducing yourself, I'll just start To my right. Andy, if you don't mind, please.

Andy Burstein

Oh, sure. Thank you so much, Kevin.

I appreciate you including us today. My name is Andy Burstein. I am with Accessible Pharmacy Services for the Blind. We're here in West Philadelphia. We are a home delivery pharmacy. We specialize in patients who are blind, deaf-blind, and have low vision. We're the largest blind owned health care company in the country.

Kevin McDaniel

Clyde? Thank you. Thank you, Andy.

Clyde Dupree

Hey, I'm Clyde Dupree. I'm the Co-Founder and Technical Lead for Beyond Accessibility. It's a small startup, primarily focusing on the technical implementations for small and medium sized businesses. We're based out of Atlanta, Georgia.

Kevin McDaniel

Thank you, Clyde. Julie?

Julie Romanowski

Good morning. I'm Julie Romanowski. I'm actually switching from... I am Senior Accessibility Specialist at State Farm, but I am soon to be the Director of Accessibility Services for Kowbility, a nonprofit accessibility organization.

Kevin McDaniel

Thank you, Julie. Thank you. Jennifer?

Jennifer Sagalyn

Hi, everyone. Jennifer Sagalyn. I am the Director of Strategic Partnerships for Perkins Access. We are the Digital Accessibility Consulting Division of Perkins School for the Blind, and we support organizations with digital accessibility guidance and strategies for ensuring that products and services are accessible.

Kevin McDaniel

Thank you, Jennifer. Appreciate it. Thank you all again for being with us today. I'm really looking forward to this conversation. So, you know, as I mentioned, earlier, today's panel is intended to discuss baking accessibility into your procurement process. And I am struggling with who to start this opening question with and because you all have all these incredible strengths.

So but I want to just kind of start with who I think the viewer is. And I think the viewer is looking for... they're in a position where they're trying to implement accessibility. They're either a decision maker or they're someone at a tactical level trying to figure out how they create their mandate, how do they build momentum for accessibility.

And so with that said, I think that I just want to kind of start it up with you're in a large organization and you're trying to change the hearts and minds. You're trying to build momentum. So I think my first question would be probably for Julie, from State Farm. Julie, where what do you what's the first step?

Knowing how important accessibility is to development and design that you have got to stop the leak somewhere. What's the first step? And what are some of the challenges that you've found to building momentum towards adopting accessibility in your procurement process?

Julie Romanowski

Okay. First step would probably be to... actually two different things. One thing is it is so very important to get executive leadership support. And when we're talking large organizations, executive leadership support doesn't mean one person. It means you need a group of people who are willing to back you and say, yes, we're going to provide the funding, we're going to provide other resources you need. Secondly, you really need to get kind of a grassroots support. Trying to pull in various groups, developers, designers, testers, others... helping them understand the importance so that they also are buying in and they start working on this. For a large organization, it can be very difficult because so many different departments, so many different teams... Like State Farm has development teams all over the U.S. And in a lot of them still, even though they work together more and more now, it's still kind of act like silos where they're kind of in their own little world and trying to get them pulled in and helping them understand the importance takes a bit of time.

Kevin McDaniel

Mm hmm. You said something... and I appreciate that. You said something about, you know, the types of stakeholders have to be involved... community groups, your developers and designers... So I guess, you know, my next question would be for Jennifer, which is, you know, Jennifer, you're the the Director of Strategic Partnerships for the Perkins School for the Blind.

What role does your organization play in advocating for accessibility and how can companies use your organization to push, you know, move the needle, so to say, in their organization? Or how can they use community groups? Kind of what the importance is of that. Sorry.

Jennifer Sagalyn

That's all right. So I think the role for Perkins Access is to help an organization think about yes, the organization's buy-in, helping to gather a stakeholder group, and educate them on what are the needs of the organization's employees. And their customers. So really providing that insight into who is your user and what are their needs specifically. And I think if you if you're able to make that connection and you're able to give someone at that sort of senior level the human element of why procurement and why accessible tools are required and really needed to be an inclusive organization.

You're starting from a very good place. We help organizations think about how they need to gather insights from their employees. We help them think about what are the ways that they can build a mechanism for supporting these efforts. So we think of our work as helping to educate as being part of a large educational institution, that's that's what we do.

And and also kind of helping with establishing policies and best practices. And then that lays that foundation for the future of, you know, making those decisions at the procurement stage is really a solid foundation for an organization's accessibility.

Kevin McDaniel

Mm hmm. I agree. I appreciate it. And so what I'm just trying to establish before I open it up with some other questions is, you know, the importance of the executive level support. And that was awesome. You know, the role that your community plays. And then, Clyde, I want to get to Andy, too, on innovation. But Clyde, going back to... so now, you know, just to establish this in the very beginning here, you know, we need the executive level support.

We need buy-in from the community and community feedback. Now from a development side, what is important? You know, if we had to establish this is step one, step two, step three... before we kind of expand the conversation, what role does development and design play and what input is needed from them to ensure an effective procurement process or procurement contract?

Can you talk a little bit about your experience from that side?

Clyde Dupree

Yes. Absolutely. So when the executive leadership is there, members of the tech side have to be there as well. As it was already mentioned, the conversion of hearts and minds, along with a lot of metrics, has to go with that as well. So an example of that would be if you were, say, bringing

in a new PDF tool, that seems to be one of the largest kinds of... we need this tool in order to fix the documentation that we send out to customers. Being able to note if it's even possible to bring it to the platform.

It's a big deal. Because as a developer, I would need to see the inner workings of that new tool and how it will be able to integrate into my platform. So with that knowledge and also knowing that the customer base for that would be so massive, would we be able to A) implement it with a reasonable amount of cost?

And my cost, I mean, the time for the developers or for my group of people to help implement this thing? And also cost us in dollars and cents, would it make sense to go down that route anyway? And then along with that, I would need to see the VPAT. And so if the tool carried its own, like internal process for accessibility, I would need to know about that prior to bringing it into mine, because we have competing factors between what the company wants to build with versus what the tool already provides, do I need to overbuild certain components or whatever it is.

So there's a lot that goes into it from a technical standpoint to make sure that I do have the buy-in for it, because once we go down that road, it can get rocky and I'll need the support to be able to say I need more humans so I can help build this thing out in order to accomplish the end-goal of the user being able to have in this case, an accessible PDF. Or in a broader sense, do we have a method to be able to say strategically that we've gone through these steps in order to implement the new tool that will allow for our customers regardless of their ability to be able to use this new feature, whatever that is. It can be for the PDF thing like I mentioned, or could just be for the site in general. And that goes along with marketing and all this other stuff. So yeah, from a technical standpoint, we absolutely need to be there in order to help those decisions get made.

Kevin McDaniel

And I love what you brought up about the PDF piece because that's often so overlooked And not from the extent we're all aware, of course, those documents need to be accessible, but just to the extent of those things that you can't really know about unless you have all of your teams there. If you, you know, you know that you have to have a mandate, you know you have to have user experience, you know, you need to have your technical team there.

And I like the example you brought on PDFs because I recall years ago we had went through this process and made everything accessible and then what we found out is that by not not testing necessarily, but seeking user input, we found out that we made all these efforts to make a certain type of PDF accessible, only to find out that most of the users who used it weren't connected to the Internet in the first place and had very limited connectivity.

And so it's like you don't find that out unless you are working closely with your community, you know? And so I love that piece. So here's exactly what we've got... the executives at the table.

We have the users at the table. We have IT at the table. Andy, do you mind telling me a little bit about your company, Accessible Pharmacy for the Blind and the innovation that goes behind it?

Because I'd like the viewers to kind of be ready to make that innovation argument when we have people at the table, when they have all the right decision makers there.

Andy Burstein

Oh, sure. So I'll share real quickly the background of our company and how we came into existence. And then answer your second question about, you know, pulling everyone in and get everyone on the same page and creating a culture that embraces accessibility.

So my business partner is blind. He lost his eyesight in his late teens. Fast forward, he ultimately earned a Ph.D. and he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the accessibility of the American retail marketplace for consumers who are blind. And so the origin of our company was based upon creative ideas that he and I had reconciled with. Are there opportunities in the marketplace where the population of blind, deaf-blind, low vision individuals is not being served?

We identified the pharmacy industry in particular as being the least accessible and the most challenging. And it wasn't by design. There's never like inaccessibility with malice, you know, but it's more about the traditional big companies really just don't focus on that. They focus on the one size fits all model, and they do it really well. That's why they make billions and billions of dollars.

But this wasn't happening. So what we decided to do was build a health care model that merged health care and accessibility together. So it's just ingrained in part of our culture. Everything that we do, whether it's interactions with our marketing team, our sales team, our health care team, it's all done under the lens of how do we make this as accessible as it possibly can be.

Because our patients are blind, more often than not. They have comorbidities as well. According to the Center for Disease Control, 26% of Americans self-identify as having some type of disability. So if we extrapolate that, all of our vendors and partners and suppliers, 26% of them, of their staff, have a disability. 26% of our, 25% of our employees are blind.

But the other 75%, it is a good likelihood to 26% of them have some type of disability. And so, you know, to make a decision to embrace accessibility, it's, you know, for us it's a good business decision. And so it's been incredible and everyone on our team has sort of embraced that and it's contagious. It extends to our vendors and our partners and our suppliers because it comes up in all of our conversations.

And so for us, it's not only who we are, but it's been a great business opportunity for us.

Kevin McDaniel

What sounds like user experience is really important, obviously.

Andy Burstein

Oh, 100%.

Kevin McDaniel

And I'm just such a big fan of user testing and input from the community. We used to test using all the standard tools and I had a mic drop moment where I had someone, one of our customers who had M.S. and used the Microsoft speech-to-text feature, something that is so rarely tested for. And you know, you can you can tab through a website and find all the places where the form fields aren't labeled or whatever it is, but you know are you testing for the user experience? Because this particular user had to control her laptop with her voice only. It wasn't just about, you know, what's visible, what's contrast related, whatever it is. It actually took her 6-7 minutes to do something that would take 30 or 40 seconds because of the difficulty she had operating the website using her voice because carousels, those kind of things.

So I'm just a big fan of the user experience. So I love what you're doing. I really appreciate that.

Andy Burstein

Thank you.

Kevin McDaniel

I love that innovation, it's great, and I just wanted to emphasize the importance of that - incorporating community in your decision So, Julie, let me go back to you. And so now we know we have. I'm just trying to imagine what it's like when a viewer is going to try to advocate to have this process changed.

You know, we have we know there's there's we need executive level support there. We have user experience. We want to talk about innovation from the user experience and the technical pieces of it. But now, Julie, so tell me... I'm in this meeting, you know, what are some of the challenges that you faced in trying to, in deploying a procurement process that has accessibility baked into it and the relationships that you've had with your vendors?

Can you talk about some of the obstacles that people may need to overcome?

Julie Romanowski

The big thing initially was just probably education. The different product owners within State Farm, different areas that maybe are looking at vendor products, don't know what they don't know. So they wouldn't know. First of all, the assumption would be that, yes, the product works for everybody. That's just what the assumption is. They wouldn't they don't know the questions to ask.

They don't know really understand, even if they're provided information, they really wouldn't understand if it was accurate or not. Clyde mentioned VPAT. If a vendor just turned a VPAT over to someone who really has no accessibility background, they'd look at it and think, oh, great, it's accessible. But they really need that additional information. What we did was we pulled together a job aid with different questions that people could ask when they're meeting with vendors.

We also recommended that they would put a pull in someone from our digital accessibility team so we can sit with them and we can listen. We can ask questions when needed. We can help them kind of interpret some of the answers they've gotten. If they're provided VPATs, we can work with them to help them understand what it means.

I've seen many, and Clyde, you mentioned this too, but you've probably seen many VPATs where the vendor is stating yes, it meets like Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 Level AA. But then when you read through it and really interpret what they provided you find out that, no, it doesn't. There are some serious issues. So yeah, I'd say the really the big hurdle initially is education, helping people understand just what they need to know before they even talk to the vendor.

Kevin McDaniel

Now, let me let me ask you this, Julie, just to follow up on that. When you talk about education, we're talking about educating vendors, right?

Julie Romanowski

Depends. More along the line of educating the people who are wanting to bring the product in. Sometimes educating the vendor. When you have various contracts or work orders or things, we may be limited on what we can provide to the vendor.

We now, it's been quite a while to be able to do this, but we now inject accessibility language into contracts, into work orders, where we would require WCAG 2.1 Level AA conformance. And when they agree to that, it's okay, they're agreeing to provide this and if they don't provide it, it's up to them to figure out what the problem is and it's up to them to fix it.

But there are some times where we have contracts, where we have vendors who are very small organizations, small companies. They don't have the resources, maybe they don't have the the the knowledge. Things like that. And we're given permission just to work with the vendor to help educate them a little more, to help them understand a little more about what we mean by accessible. What we mean by WCAG 2.1 Level AA conformance.

Kevin McDaniel

And I like that it's education for stakeholders within the company as well. There are constraints. Sometimes you don't control the code. Sometimes it's not proprietary or it's built by someone else or it's expired. It's old code that's not supported anymore. Excuse me. So let me go... let me switch to Clyde. So, Clyde, so how do you make sense of all that?

Because I've been in these meetings and I know, I know exactly what it looks like. You know, you have procurement agents that are like, what is this? You know? And then you have, you have vendors who also feel the same way. They all need education and customers, you know, procurement customers within the organization that don't really understand the importance and can't get their mind around the fact that there's barriers to making this product accessible.

So what what's your experience here? I mean, how do you make sense of all that when you get to that point?

Clyde Dupree

Being in this space, being the tech guy, you create enemies kind of quickly because of the what you have to do in order to paint the full picture of the end user experience. So one of the best stories that I have to go with that and of course, I will keep the names away from the players in order to protect the guilty in this case.

So the VPAT arrived first and the company that I was working for, or actually working to help protect at that point, was very interested in the product because it would allow for their search engine to be just super robust. And so in going through the VPAT, I had realized that the things were missing is the best way to put it.

It wasn't on there. It wasn't exactly laid out in a way that said we're accessible to these standards. It's basically saying that this is the standard we're shooting for and in the future will eventually get there. But here's what we know of based on our internal testing, that we are good for these criterion, but we aren't quite there yet or in process of hitting the other ones.

And it was as a 2018 or 19. And so with that did for me it was throw a big red flag. And by, between 2019 and 2020, there were changes to the development guidelines for how to implement a lot of the components, or at least some of those guidelines over there to allow for the user or the end user to be able to go through this application or to go through this interface.

And so when ended up happening was we had competing factors between the host company and the company that was trying to sell the thing, and so the only way to make sense of all of it was to say, here's a live demonstration of what it would look like if we use this tool in this environment. So I built it real quick. And we went through and learned that there were so many inequities based even off what their internal testing was versus what the real life testing would have looked like and what the experience would have been.

So it goes back to the point previously of user experience. If I'm a, or using the persona of a sighted user or low vision using with the keyboard, here's what it looks like. If I'm a completely blind person using any form of AT on this tool, again, this is what it looks like. And by showing that live it allowed for both sides or both parties to be able to say, oh, this really doesn't work for our needs.

And by the way, what's up with that VPAT? It's not accurate at all. So that allowed for different kind of contractual statement to be drawn up. It allowed for a different, I guess, a search for the tool. It allowed for a lot of changes to take place. And what it did in the longer term was allow for the vendor to want to work more with the purchasing company to change the language and by saying, can we partner up in becoming more accessible because we obviously don't know what we're doing here and we kind of exchanged knowledge in order to create this tool that works for this space.

And we'll kind of share the development costs in creating it. So that way you can use it and then we can take that new knowledge and build our new, I guess, our next iteration, you know, for maybe for another company to use. But still you can help each other out in that regard. But it'll be cheaper, kind of.

It'll be cheaper based on dollars and cents per not of course, development costs. But it allows for folks to be able to better understand what the entire focus should be on that product only by doing that demonstration first.

Kevin McDaniel

And you just said you hit something, which sounds like we're in the decision making process, the problem-solving part of the process where we ever but there is support there. We've injected the language. Now we have a vendor that's come back and they're not accessible. We're trying to figure out how to deal with it. Right? We have a VPAT back or an accessibility statement, which I'd like to get to in a minute.

But I want to jump over to Jennifer, too, because this is something that was really interesting. We ran a poll on LinkedIn. Just a small little poll, but it was interesting to me, we asked, you know, what's the most important thing in ensuring accessibility, implementing accessibility? Is it WCAG? Is it Section 508? Is it the ADA? Or is it reasonable accommodation and modification?

You know, the concept of reasonable modification, a modification of accommodation. And so my question is, you know, what Clyde talked about is the VPAT. We put the language in. Everyone's on the same page. VPAT comes back, as I'm sure everyone here has seen, there's always some functionality that doesn't work or they can't speak to, we have to solve the problem.

Tell us about your experience and how do you deal with that? When an organization, I'm just trying to think again about the viewer who is okay, I have the VPAT out. I've got the language in. Now, this vendor we really want has brought this back and said they don't meet criteria 12 through 16, whatever it is. How do you resolve that now and what role does that user experience play? And what guidance would you give someone trying to navigate through?

Okay. Is this accessible enough? Does it meet the requirements of the ADA? Or should we stick to standards? I didn't mean to load the question. Sorry.

Jennifer Sagalyn

So I'm going to step back for just a moment to talk a little bit about that education piece again. And what we have found is, you know, every organization is it a different point and has different needs. And one of the ways that we help to educate is to think about that initial point of contact. How does your organization evaluate products? Is it centralized?

Is it decentralized? Do you have individuals in different departments who are, you know, making a decision about which tool they would like to use to meet their needs? And we like to go back to that point and think about how that person has the information that they need so that they can begin to ask those questions at the very beginning of the process.

So that it is something that as they're making a decision about the tool that they want to bring in, that they have gathered enough information, that they're making the decision before they go to contract. So the education is shifted very early in the process. And it's, so once you get to that point, that is already part of the conversation.

And I think that we find that is extremely helpful, but it does require quite a bit of education from individuals who are involved in that process. So uncovering how you as an organization are addressing, you know, bringing on new tools and your vendor relationships is critical. So I think that for folks listening, that's something to consider is is, you know, how how is this structured?

And and I think that, you know, Julie was talking about State Farm. That's a very large organization. They're going to have a different process. When you get to that point. And you, to answer your question, about having a VPAT and identifying that there are issues. We believe that it's really important to have a relationship with the vendor to really help to provide feedback on... We think of it as a prioritization. Where are those major barriers for a user? So that kind of gets to how you need to have a process for doing an internal review so that you can

gather that information. What are the major barriers? And then where are some areas where issues need to be incorporated into an accessibility roadmap, given some timeframe to resolve those issues?

And then when you look at a VPAT, you asking for a VPAT to be created and updated within a certain time frame. So we think of it as multiple steps towards working with that vendor and at the same time making sure that you're addressing those key barriers for your user.

Kevin McDaniel

Yeah, and I love that. I love that answer too, because you brought you brought in, you brought up something that I've written down. I want to go back to the entire panel on, which is, you know, who's checking this stuff, right? You know, what's the key? What's what's the checks and balance process here? Right. I know we did skip that, so I appreciate bringing that up.

I want to go back to that. But when you talked about addressing it from the very beginning. What that sounds like to me is we're not planning to get to a VPAT where they don't meet the requirements because we're talking about perhaps maybe user stories, accessibility user stories, that need to be incorporated in the product scope before we go to VPAT.

And so with...

Jennifer Sagalyn

Right. Right.

Kevin McDaniel

Yeah. So we need we need to talk about that for a second. So, Andy, I can imagine that with your product, developing the launch, the deployment... You've probably gone through quite a bit of user testing, accessibility user stories. Can you talk a little bit about your process?

Andy Burstein

Oh, sure. Well, I think one of the things that's really important for us is there isn't necessarily a finish line for accessibility, like ah, we crossed that line there, now we're accessible. You know. Accessibility, there's an ongoing pursuit of accessibility because there's always new trends and technology. Trends in how people understand and absorb information, federal guidelines, local guidelines... So it's a moving target, accessibility. So that's the first thing. The second thing is, you know, really creating, I think Jennifer alluded to this, which is, you know, inviting the stakeholders to give feedback. We've created.

It's amazing the second you ask someone who may self-identify as having a disability to say, like, how can we be more accessible? It's amazing. They'll talk your ears off because quite often

they aren't given that platform to share personal feedback about how the experience with your company can be made more accessible. And we've embraced that concept, and we ask all of our patients and vendors and suppliers, you know, what things could we be doing to be more accessible? What solutions have they learned about accessibility that they're willing to share with us?

And so this collaborative effort from all the stakeholders in our company actually helps elevate our accessibility, day-by-day.

Kevin McDaniel

Andy, do you have an ongoing dialog with I mean, I know this a private business and my background's government, so we always kept a resource group. I always managed a council or a prioritization committee. What kind of open dialog did you guys have through the development process?

Andy Burstein

Or I'll give you something that has been really fun for us, which was last summer we launched our first college internship program. We had one student last year. We have three students this year. But this student, he's a college student. He's blind. He's a Junior this year at SUNY Binghamton and one of the projects we gave him was we gave him a list of 100 patients of ours.

And his job was to call these patients and ask them about what they like about us, what they don't like about us, what other kinds of services we could be offering. And for the sake of this conversation, what other things could we be doing to be more accessible? And we prepped this student. He had never done anything like this before.

And we were like, there's a good likelihood people are going to slam the phones on you or be like, don't ever call me again. All 100 people talked his ear off. And for us, it really helped us realize that, you know, we don't have to guess about accessibility. We just have to have a dialog about accessibility. Internally, externally, and with all the stakeholders that are part of our business.

And that's how we're really learn about how to be as accessible as we possibly can be.

Kevin McDaniel

Yeah, I love I love that the collaboration piece. It's so important. That's the struggle that I had with it. You know, whenever I'm working and trying to build accessibility to procurement, it just seemed like the idea of it was so scary to everyone. it was a challenge. But when you bring it in, when you present it in a way that, you know, if you say something like, hey, I'm a user who uses a screen reader, and I'd like to be able to access all the interactive elements on a website with my keyboard. For whatever reason, that makes sense to the folks in IT.

They can wrap their heads around it. When you just call it accessibility, it just seems like you know, it just doesn't go anywhere. So, Jennifer, you brought up the point. I want to open it up for everybody, but I want to go to Julie real quick because I know and I apologize. I had not we not met prior to this meeting, Jennifer, but I had spoke to Julie, and I know that she has some experience in that. The checks and balance piece.

We talked about that in our previous meeting. You know, how important is that and who should be doing that? Who should be ensuring that those contracts actually meet the requirements? Is that farmd out? Is that centralized? Who's reviewing that and what stakeholders are involved?

Julie Romanowski

Were are you asking Jennifer or me?

Kevin McDaniel

Yeah, Julie. Julie, I apologize.

Julie Romanowski

All right.

Well, there isn't any one person or one group that would be involved in that. We have a purchasing department. They're involved, of course. They're the ones who different areas reach out to when they're wanting to create contracts or work orders, things like that. Work with vendors. There's also a corporate law department that needs to be involved as well to provide legal resources, information. They really need to pull in accessibility area that has the knowledge and the business area. The business areas going to do this. It's just a big collaboration.

All these different areas need to work together on that.

Kevin McDaniel

And then let me I want to kind of open that up a little bit. But Jennifer, let me go back to my original question to you was about VPATs and if an organization, you know, if they can't meet certain requirements... Is it possible to be fully accessible?

Jennifer Sagalyn

Absolutely not.

Journey. It's a journey. It's not possible. I think that when we have clients that encounter a situation where a vendor has provided a VPAT and they're not fully accessible, it goes back again to, you know, having that conversation and that relationship. And that isn't always possible. And then, you know, you're really wanting to think about which vendor will be cooperating and the most helpful in the process.

But I think that we will guide a company to, again, think about how to work that relationship in a way that gets the roadmap involved. Where are you? Where are you going to put your resources and when will you be addressing these issues? I think that is is the most critical piece is having that engagement and having that commitment. That's really critical.

Kevin McDaniel

And you know, when you when you talk about the vendors, that relationship, I agree with you. I'd like to get Clyde's input on just kind of war stories from that exact situation. And I only ask that because I don't mean to go back to the well on it, but I just know, you know, if I'm thinking about viewers that are trying to set up a process and they get their first VPAT back and it's not even a VPAT, it's like a statement of accessibility or, you know, something like that... I just want them to say, hey, I heard this.

This is the next thing you do. You know, you go through the testing or whatever. And so, Clyde, can you talk about situations where you've gotten VPATS back, they didn't meet it and what you did to overcome those barriers?

Clyde Dupree

Oh, sure. The war stories are pretty consistent. They happen so often that they just become a part of the job. As we all know, if you're even in the conversation about accessibility, it's really touchy because there's that lack of knowledge on one side, the fear of it from litigation standpoint. And then there's the what do I do next thing that all corporations have to deal with. So when you're dealing with a VPAT that is suspect, or if you're dealing with a... One of my best war stories has to do with a company that just said, that's silly. That's what you're going to get. And we're not doing anything beyond that because we've made all this money based off of this sheet of paper from 15 years ago and we're not going to update anything.

And so you're going to run across players that are like that. And when they appear they will often say that it's as good as it's going to be because they could have technology that is driven a certain way. And to unwrap that, to become more accessible may not be something they're capable of at this point. So because of that, they kind of say this is the take it or leave it kind of scenario.

And so when that happens, it's been my experience to let folks like that go, because in the time that it takes for you to go down the path of convincing them that it's not only the right thing to do, but it's the profitable thing to them if we're going to be capitalists, which is what the

majority of us are. We are in a for profit kind of business setting especially when we're dealing with procurement.

If money has to exchange for a tool that we need in order to be more profitable, we have to look out for that business bottom-end, which means that for us to be able to expand our client base in the most consistent, broadest way possible by grabbing that 26% that's out there unserviced or underserved, as we believe them to be. It would make business sense for us to provide accessible content or accessible tools within our digital app thing.

So all that being said, to say when you've got a potential partner in that vendor for becoming accessible, going down the path with them may not necessarily be the best business practice to do. And it's not the happy ending that we oftentimes want. There needs to be more than one options out there in order to say this PDF company that provides us a way to get away from this Apache server mess because we have to migrate, but they're not the ones that we have to look at a second that's a little bit more closely related to what we need without the fight. Because what will end up happening is that we'll bring them in.

We'll overbuild our processes to allow for that broken process to work. And then our development costs shoots up. And then it makes accessibility seem like it's the reason why none of this stuff worked. And we still didn't expand our baseline, we didn't expand our viewership, we didn't create a better experience. We just spent a bunch of money on a thing that we thought we needed and ended up being a mess.

So it's oftentimes worth looking at option number two or even three in order to get that better route. Now, let's say that everything's even and we're looking at the differences between a complete VPAT, a VPAT that's kind of in flux, and one that's not going to move, or hasn't moved in a while. That means your process prior to that conversation with them has already shifted left.

So you've already got the requirements laid out. You've already got your DEI folks in line, you've already got legal representation, business and tech. So that's a big conversation to have internally prior to going out to finding that group of two or three vendors in order to help you accomplish that need. And so that will help solve that problem prior to becoming a problem because you already know what you're looking for.

So that means your options that are out there aren't so closely related to the cache that that company may be carrying. It is literally down to we know that you're more accessible than most. We know that you've got a tool that we can integrate, that we won't have to do so much work for. And finally, we know that your your response to accessibility isn't like a third or fourth thought to your product.

It's top of mind. So your top of mindness for accessibility as a feature is matching ours. And so that union should be a bit better or at least it'll be better integrated into your processes. Hopefully that answered the question.

Kevin McDaniel

No, that's great. Yeah, I like that. That was you know, it's about including accessibility from the start. And that's it was what your what your explaining... You actually led me right. It my, my next question, which was for Andy. You know where I know that if you're if you're a startup and you're developing the technology, you're more on the vendor side of the procurement process.

But you also have to I'm sure there's all kinds of third party technologies that you've had to incorporate into your product. How do you resolve something when you've identified the inaccessible part, if you have? I don't know if you have. But I know that a lot of the third party stuff we don't have control over, how do you work around that?

Did you start with user stories or did you test afterwards? How do you retrofit? What do you do?

Andy Burstein

Well, one of the things that we embraced early on is that we are not a technology company. We thought we may, but all right, there are other groups and individuals and companies that have already figured this out.

So it it was on us to actually seek out these companies that could we could embrace their solution and integrate into our comprehensive solution. And so, for example, let me just give you one example. We're able to use Braille on any of our packaging for patients of ours that use Braille. Okay. So Braille is not a one size fits all. There are different levels of proficiency that people have with Braille.

So understanding the difference between grade one Braille, which are essentially just letters and contracted Braille, which is, you know, contractions actually can be identified by a single symbol. Identifying that, all right, that's how the market understands Braille. How do we now communicate Braille? And how do we go find companies out there that make printers and embossers that are compatible with our packaging?

Right. So then we had to reach out to the packaging companies and say, all right, well, we need this. You know, this Braille explanation is a little bit bigger than that small package. What size packaging do you have to accommodate this Braille? And so there's always layers of reaching out to existing service providers, existing solutions and reconciling them together to ultimately present something in the marketplace that is usable and accessible.

Kevin McDaniel

Yeah, I love that answer. And so that's that's that's what I was really trying to get to. And I appreciate everybody's patient. I, I just kind of see these viewers as like, okay, I've got the right

folks at the table. We finally got something, we got some language into the contract and how do we enforce it? How do we test after?

And it sounds like the common theme is just to incorporate the user experience into the stories from the very beginning. So that you're not so far down the road. You know, in the fourth quarter, and stuck with two or three different products and neither one satisfies the needs Okay. Well, I really appreciate it. We're almost out of time with 6 minutes.

I'd like to just kind of go to everybody and just ask the last question. I'll start with, I just want to mix it up. I'll start with Jennifer. Jennifer, from your experience, what do you think? What do you think are the essential steps? If there's only one, if there's two, that need to be taken for someone if they don't have an accessible procurement, they don't have accessibility in their procurement process right now.

What's the most important thing for them to do to start the conversation?

Jennifer Sagalyn

I would say that the sort of it's hard to answer that with just one number. But I think that communicating your requirements clearly and having a policy is I think one of the most essential steps that an organization can take. And that is something that really sets the stage for the rest of the conversations.

The person that is asking the multiple vendors for their input. They need to have that policy in order to communicate to a vendor this is how our organization is, you know, looking to evaluate your product. And that gives them that sort of standing and that so I that's that's what I think is a really critical step.

Kevin McDaniel

Communicating the expectations. That's why a collecting community input is so important up front. You know? So then I just, same question. Julie, do you have, you have a lot of experience in managing procurement. Same question.

Julie Romanowski

Well, I agree with Jennifer 100%, but also for organizations, companies that don't have that accessibility know how. I strongly encourage them to reach out to an organization to get that accessibility specialist in to help them. Just help them learn. Larger organizations may be able to afford to hire different accessibility companies like TPGI, Level Access, things like that. Smaller organizations,

there are nonprofits. There's Carroll Center for the Blind on the East Coast. There's Knowbility in Austin. There's a WebAIM. What are they in Washington State? You know, there are different

nonprofit accessibility organizations that could help them that would be a little less expensive. But I really, really encourage them to bring in that accessibility knowledge. I'd say don't just do it on your own unless you have a strong accessibility team within your organization.

Kevin McDaniel

Yeah, I agree with you on that one. Clyde, same question. From your experience, what's essential here? What's the take away?

Clyde Dupree

The users zoom account? Get a user zoom account and use it fully. If I'm the company and I need to understand what my customers are dealing with, grab a user flow, one of your more profitable ones, and have a group of people with and without disabilities go through that site and speak to how the experience of it is. To the previous points, structurally, strategically through education. That's setting the foundation for how your company needs to work and then taking that information and watching folks go through your site, struggle or not. That will help take the findings from that and then be able to implement some real change that starts with the educational piece and then continues on with that vendor support like Level Access, TPGI, or Beyond or whomever, to help you understand more of why that person couldn't get through that site, hit that submit to buy button.

So, you know, so all that stuff goes together.

Kevin McDaniel

Yeah, I love that. Andy, please. Same question. What are the takeaways? What do they need to know? You know?

Andy Burstein

Sure. Well, I want to build upon what Julie said, which I think was right on. Yeah. Obviously, everyone can hire a consultant. There are no shortage of consultants out there. There's different types of consultants, but a simple Google search will help you find small to large consultants in your community.

But there are nonprofits and community organizations and local organizations and state organizations that have a wealth of knowledge that they're willing and able to share for free. And just a simple phone call will give you access to that information. And it's not a one size fits all. It's not like I'm going to call this one organization and I've solved all my accessibility issues. There may need to be, you may need to reach out to a local ARC affiliate to learn about individuals with cognitive, intellectual disabilities. A local State organization like an OVR office, that can help you identify individuals with other kinds of disabilities. But in each of these organizations, there's information, including if you decide that you want to get a consultant and

hire a consultant, a lot of these groups and organizations can make recommendations for ones that they have found to be most helpful in the community.

Kevin McDaniel

Yeah, I think it's a great idea for everybody listening in... OVR you referred to is the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Andy Burstein

Oh, yes. I apologize. Thank you.

Kevin McDaniel

Yeah. No worries. No worries. So thank you all for your time and participation with all your knowledge and expertise. We're so grateful. I just really am so grateful for your time. And thank you all for joining us today.

Julie Romanowski

Thank you very much.

Andy Burstein

Bye everyone. Thank you.

Jennifer Sagalyn

Such a pleasure. Bye bye.

Clyde Dupree

Thank you.

Kaela

Thank you to Andy, Clyde, Julie, and Jennifer for sharing your time and expertize with us. Within the next hour or so, you will be able to view the recording of today's event at AccessibilityPlus.Live. Simply click on the event, scroll to the agenda, and click the link to watch the recording or download the transcripts. While you are on the event page, don't forget to check out today's sponsors: Verbit, The Bureau of Internet Accessibility, and Propeller Media Works. We are so grateful for their support. Make sure to join us in June for our next event: Accessibility Laws: Are Platform Providers Liable or are You? Visit AccessibilityPlus.Live to register. Thank you for your time today.