EBOOK

Answering Your Digital Accessibility FAQs

Get the answers to the most common questions around digital accessibility

APPLAUSE

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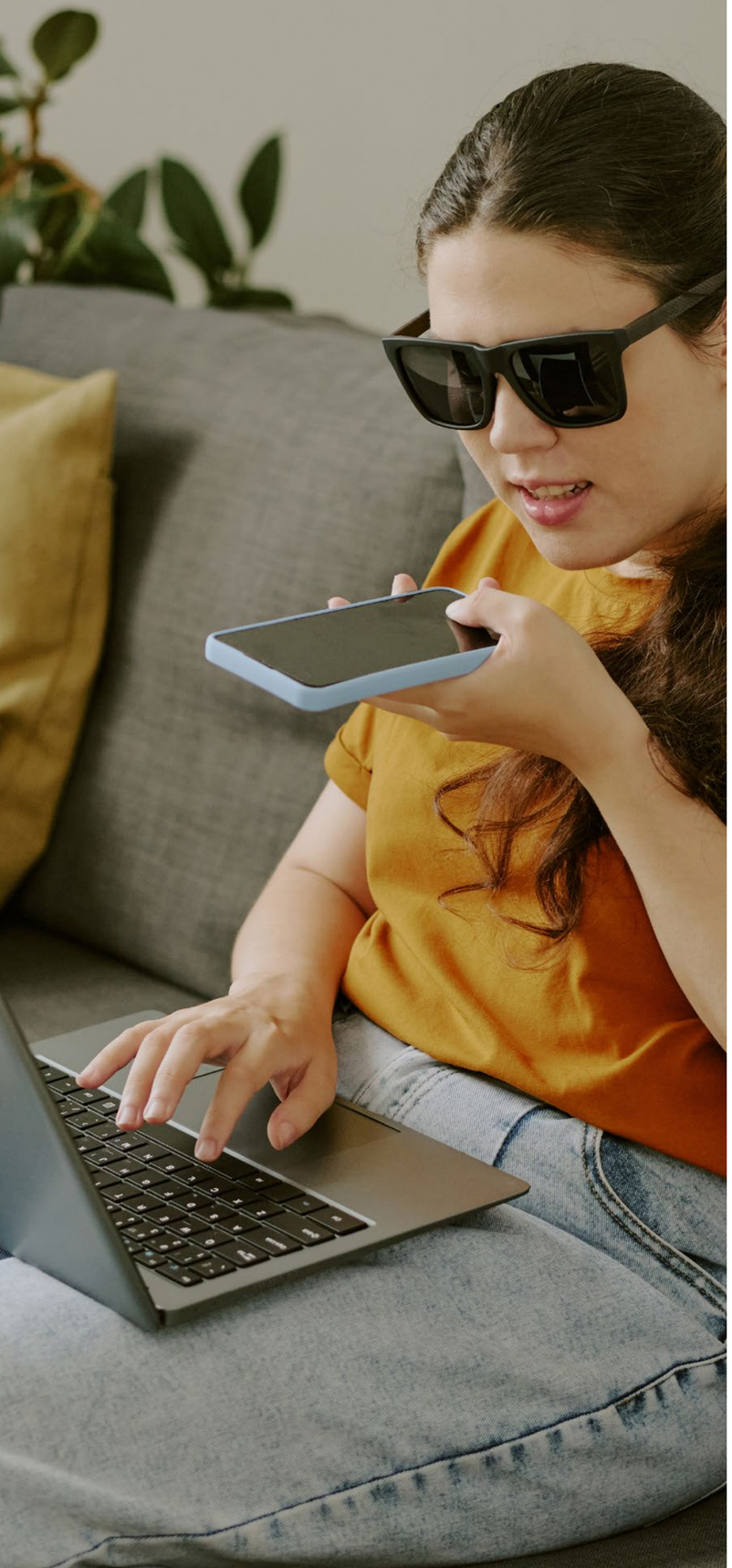

Answering Your Digital Accessibility FAQs

As Applause provides accessibility testing services around the world, organizations increasingly ask us how they can best assess their digital properties against key accessibility standards, and accordingly, build or improve strategy and implementation toward accessibility goals. These organizations seek to understand the importance of digital accessibility, how their organization can best conform to guidelines and/or regulations, and the value of automated accessibility testing tools.

Why is digital accessibility important to my organization?

Disability is part of being human. An estimated 1.3 billion people – about 16% of the global population – currently experience significant disability. This number is increasing due in part to population aging and an increase in the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases.

Digital accessibility is about making websites and applications useful for the widest and most diverse audiences. This includes making digital

properties accessible for people with disabilities (PWD). While some disabilities are visible, many others are not, such as color blindness.

The world is becoming more reliant on digital properties, and organizations that don't prioritize accessible experiences will likely lose business. In addition to missing out on sales from PWD who cannot complete transactions, brands who don't demonstrate they care about PWD may suffer reputational damage. On the other hand, accessibility champions like Cisco often benefit from the word of mouth and social media that praises and rewards leading-edge firms that prioritize accessibility.

A few specific examples of the ways that organizations can provide accessible experiences for people with disabilities are ensuring that:

- Sufficient color contrast for users with low vision, age-related changes, or color-deficient vision (commonly called color blindness) is addressed
- Users can navigate the site without the use of a mouse
- People with dyslexia can access easy-to-read fonts or can change the font
- Buttons and links can be selected by people with hand tremors

1.3 billion

people in the world have a disability

According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 1.3 billion people – about 16% of the global population – currently experience significant disability.

Source: World Health Organization

How can accessibility help an organization, outside of making experiences accessible for people with disabilities?

While accessibility is often considered in the context of PWD, it actually impacts all users. For example, having clear and correct closed captioning within a video on your website can make it easier for anyone in a noisy environment (gym, airport, etc.) to engage with the content — not just people with hearing disabilities. The ability for an app or IoT device to respond to voice commands can benefit users who may have their hands full, not just those with mobility issues, low vision or blindness.

When your website is accessible — especially when tested with people with disabilities — you gain insights that can drive innovation in your overall user experience. These often go beyond basics like better navigation, stronger color contrast, clearer icons, buttons, links, forms, and images. These are all elements that benefit everyone and show a company's efforts toward being inclusive.

> **Digital accessibility is about making websites and applications useful for the widest and most diverse audiences.**

Finally, doing what's right for all users may also protect you against potential assertions of legal claims that damage brand image and result in costly defense. A 2019 United States Supreme Court decision indicates that online businesses may be subject to legal claims if the user can demonstrate that such sites are not providing experiences that are accessible to PWD. As laws and standards evolve, maintaining accessibility conformance can reduce the risk of fines, settlements and reputational damage.

What does ‘ADA testing’ or ‘508 testing’ really mean?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed in 1990, is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against people in all areas of public life, including jobs, school, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The ADA makes it illegal for any government entity or business to provide goods and services to the public without ensuring that the entities are accessible by people with disabilities.

Because the law was passed before widespread internet adoption, the ADA largely applies to physical accessibility such as having a wheelchair ramp for people to enter a building. Though digital accessibility lawsuits are often filed under the ADA, it lacks specific statutes that relate to digital accessibility, which creates gray areas. When it comes to the ADA and digital accessibility, it is better for organizations to err on the side of caution and make themselves as accessible as possible.

Section 508 is part of the United States’ Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and requires federal agencies to make their electronic and IT assets accessible to people with disabilities. This law specifically applies to organizations that are selling to government agencies.

If your customers are outside the U.S., there are other government guidelines to consider. Two examples include the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and the European Accessibility Act.

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What is WCAG?

WCAG stands for Web Content Accessibility Guidelines which are published by the Web Accessibility Initiative. The goal of WCAG is to provide a single shared standard for web content accessibility that meets the needs of individuals, organizations and governments internationally. WCAG helps organizations be compliant to accessibility laws such as Section 508.

WCAG 2.2, the latest version of the guidelines, has 9 more accessibility success criteria than WCAG 2.1 that was published in 2018. It contains guidelines that are organized under four principles: perceivable, operable, understandable and robust. For each guideline, there are testable success criteria, which have three levels of progressive accessibility achievement: A, AA and AAA. WCAG 2.2 suggests that most organizations aim for AA conformance because it provides a good balance between achieving a comprehensive level of accessibility and being practical to implement. For more on WCAG, visit the Web Accessibility Initiatives website.

How does WCAG relate to the European Accessibility Act's EN 301 549 standard?

WCAG is widely considered the international standard for accessibility. A great example of this is illustrated in the European Accessibility Act, which uses a European accessibility standard called EN 301 549. In simple terms, we say that EN 301 549 is "WCAG plus," meaning it is literally, by reference, WCAG 2.1 inside EN 301 549, but with additional checkpoints. As such, WCAG-compliant organizations within the EU and those that do business within the EU, only have to achieve modest additional success criteria.

BLOG

European Accessibility Act and EN 301 549 Explained

How conformant is my organization's website?

Technically, conformance is a yes/no question — you either meet all WCAG requirements at a given level, or you don't. Even within each checkpoint, conformance is binary — you either pass or fail, but "passing" or "failing" a checkpoint doesn't necessarily reflect outcomes for users. In real-world applications, accessibility is a spectrum, and many organizations work toward conformance over time. An accessibility review shows you how many WCAG checkpoints your organization passed or failed, and how many critical/high/medium/low issues were found.

You can somewhat "measure" improvement by the number of accessibility bugs that testers find — if the number of bugs goes down, hopefully that means your business is getting closer to conformance. However, there is gray area, as the number of WCAG failures is not an indication of how accessible your organization's website is. A site that fails 50% of WCAG checkpoints might still be pretty accessible, while a site that "only" fails 5% of WCAG checkpoints might have many blockers and be very inaccessible. This is why testing with people with disabilities is such a key element to overall accessibility testing; they can provide confidence that your site is usable and put blockers in perspective.

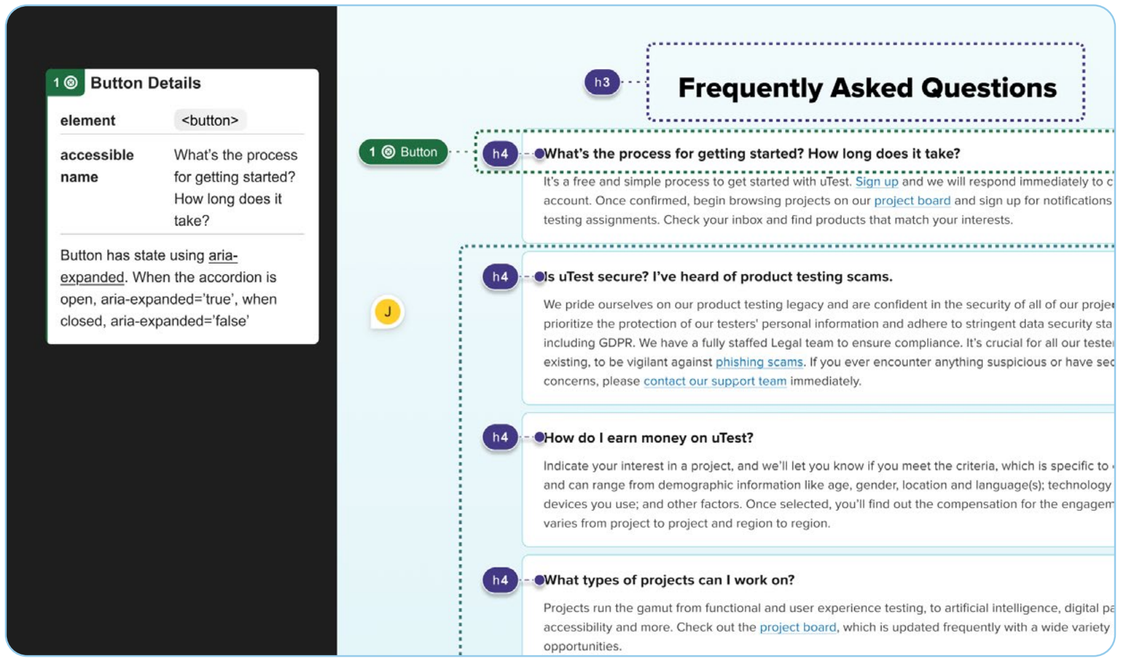
How should I approach accessibility testing?

If this is your organization's first time testing existing websites and products for accessibility, take small steps at first. While a full test pass is great, if you try to test all your digital properties at once, you could be inundated with bugs. It may be best to test a smaller sample of pages that is key to your customers' journey.

After testing, fix all the high-severity bugs (and retest to make sure they're fixed correctly), then decide if medium-severity bugs should be fixed next, or if assessing another section of the site would be better.

For new websites and digital properties, you should take a different approach. Embrace accessibility during the design process — review designs for accessibility issues and annotate the designs to prevent accessibility issues when the designs are handed off to developers. Be sure to involve PWD in these early stages and throughout the SDLC.

In addition to testing, consider incorporating accessibility training for your design, development, marketing and legal/contracts teams. Marketing email campaigns should be written with accessibility principles in mind, and contracts with third-party design firms or development shops should contain accessibility language.



Annotations in the design process highlight accessibility issues such as heading structure, descriptive alt text, color constrast and more.

What type of device coverage do I need in my test plan for accessibility testing? Is it the same as for functional testing?

The amount of testing across devices can depend on your testing budget. For desktop, at a minimum, test with Chrome and the screen reader JAWS. This will catch the majority of accessibility issues. However, if time and budget permit, you can add another desktop matrix like FireFox and NVDA or VoiceOver on Mac with Safari.

For mobile web you can add testing on an iPhone using the Safari browser plus VoiceOver screen reader and Android phone using the Chrome browser plus Talkback screen reader.

The majority, if not all, issues will be found in desktop Chrome with JAWS, but there are occasionally issues with other browser and screen reader versions and form factors on the phones.

How can I build accessibility into my software delivery lifecycle if it is a manual process?

The sooner you incorporate accessibility into the timeline, the better. When you find issues later they become more expensive to fix.

During the design process, review all wireframes and other mockups with accessibility in mind. However, remember that this requires that the design team is educated on accessibility principles.

Next, educate the development team so they use accessibility principles in implementing the designs. The first step with accessible implementation is to use as much native semantic html as possible, such as real <button> elements or <h2> elements. Some accessibility testing jobs can be run with automated testing tools, but as this blog, Why Automated Accessibility Testing Tools Miss So Much indicates, these tools alone cannot be used to find all accessibility issues. They typically:

- find between 20% and 40% of accessibility issues
- cover approximately 25% of WCAG Level A success criteria, and 17% of Level AA

While there are manual steps, the key is to think about accessibility all throughout the lifecycle and not consider it an “add on” check at the very end.

Why are transcripts, captions and audio descriptions or alternatives, important and how do I ensure they are available according to WCAG guidelines?

Transcripts and captions are needed for someone using a Braille display, but often others simply prefer to read text instead of watching a video. Transcripts and captions should contain a verbatim account of everything that is spoken, identify who the speaker is (by name, if known, or stating “different speaker” to let the user know someone else is talking), and contain other important sounds such as applause, laughter, questions from the audience, music, etc. Audio descriptions are like having a narrator explain what is going on or like reading a descriptive book. They cover sounds, setting, action sequences, facial expressions and more.

Section 1.2 of WCAG covers media guidelines, specifically transcripts, captions and audio descriptions in detail.

As an organization, how can we develop or further build our internal accessibility practice?

Though some organizations start to progress their accessibility culture and program with just a few individuals taking interest and action, it is very important to get buy-in from upper management. It's helpful when executives are on board and understand the business benefits of accessibility. Treat accessibility like internationalization and security. It has to be built into the software and not added on at the end.

Next, start training as many of your design, development and testing teams as possible in digital accessibility, as well as training staff to become accessibility champions across your organization. A best practice for organization is to hire (or train) someone to be the main point of contact for accessibility. Look for someone who understands accessibility and has experience in the area. Short of in-house expertise, it can help to hire an accessibility expert to develop a training plan to meet the KPIs you've set for your team.

Finally, practice reviewing your products for accessibility issues. At first, it's helpful to hire a company that can perform the review. As your organization reviews the feedback, you should study the results of the testing very carefully and see if you can mimic those results. Then try a test of a small set of pages early in the development process and train staff to avoid these types of errors in future product development. Over time, this will build accessibility awareness into the product development process overall.

Treat accessibility like internationalization and security. It has to be built into the software and not added on at the end.

How can Applause help with accessibility testing?

Applause embeds accessibility into every stage of development with an end-to-end solution or individual services that align with organizations' needs.

At the design stage, we leverage experts and end users with disabilities for participation in design reviews and research, including one-on-one consultations, research recordings and empathy sessions.

When building and testing digital products, we provide in-sprint testing, team training services, UX benchmarking studies and conformance assessments – summarizing recommendations for improvement.

During the release stage, we give you the tools to reinforce best practices and empathy across teams and expand accessibility programs to new products or areas within the organization.

Located around the globe, our accessibility experts help you achieve success criteria for WCAG 2.2, Section 508, and the European Accessibility Act, along with other accessibility guidelines. Applause provides a list of failures prioritized by severity level, along with detailed bug reports containing screenshots, videos and remediation recommendations when possible.

While we do not test for specific disabilities, conducting testing against just one WCAG checkpoint can be beneficial to a variety of disabilities. For example, testing against WCAG checkpoint 1.4.3 for minimum contrast can uncover issues that would impact people with discolored lenses, dyslexic readers and can help when using a mobile device outside in bright sunlight.

Our accessibility experts help achieve success criteria for WCAG 2.2, Section 508, and the European Accessibility Act, along with other accessibility guidelines.

Where can we get answers to additional accessibility questions about specific regions or requirements?

Applause answers accessibility questions for enterprises around the world every day. Our research reveals that organizations are continuing to prioritize and invest in accessibility. Some of the actions your organization will face are quite technical in nature, need input from PWD and require significant learning and mind shifts. No matter where you are in your accessibility journey, there's always room for improvement. A consistent focus on accessibility goes a long way to progressing your organization's inclusivity goals. As we like to say at Applause, every day should be Global Accessibility Awareness Day.

The FAQs in this ebook are just a starting point to better understanding digital accessibility and how to best apply accessibility testing. Accessibility is a nuanced topic and many teams need expert guidance as they seek to make their digital properties more accessible.

Have more questions?

We're here to help. Contact us.

About Applause

Applause is the world leader in digital quality – built by innovators, powered by people and dedicated to the comprehensive digital testing and feedback needs of our global enterprise customers.

Our fully managed solutions harness a powerful combination of community-based testing and advanced technology to ensure organizations can move quickly to release apps, devices and experiences that are consistently functional, intuitive and inclusive in any market. Our experts steward customers through the entire testing process, from strategy through execution, at every stage of the software development lifecycle. And, we seamlessly supplement existing resources, providing actionable, real-time insights that drive customer retention and revenue.

With specialties including accessibility, AI and payment testing, we're proud to be an essential partner to the most innovative names in the digital economy, as we work together to ensure technology works for everyone, everywhere.

Ready to learn more? Contact us today.

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