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Digital Accessibility Buyer's Guide

A comprehensive how-to: Understanding digital accessibility and selecting the vendor that best meets your needs

Digital accessibility.

The phrase itself seems straightforward: make your digital assets accessible to individuals of all abilities, including those with disabilities. But with a variety of digital accessibility vendors, and their varying claims and capabilities, buying decisions can become quite complex.

Adding to this complexity is an extreme sense of urgency. The vast majority of companies exploring digital accessibility solutions are purchasing for the first time, and many may be reacting to a lawsuit or legal demand letter.

In this guide, we help you understand and evaluate the various types of digital accessibility vendors and their capabilities. We define digital accessibility and explain why it's important for your business. We also compare the different provider approaches, arm you with questions to ask, and give you tips on internal alignment. Our aim is to help you find the partner best suited for your overall accessibility objectives.

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What is digital accessibility?

Digital accessibility means making it possible for everyone, regardless of their ability or the assistive technology they use, to have equal access to digital assets such as websites, mobile apps, software and other digital products and services.

Digital accessibility is the process of making websites, mobile apps, software and other digital experiences accessible to everyone. It recognizes that people interact with technology in diverse ways, and provides solutions that enable people with disabilities to engage with digital assets, tools, products, and services.

Just as ramps, braille signage, and audible pedestrian systems enable people with disabilities to navigate the physical world, accessible digital experiences remove online barriers that would otherwise prevent individuals from seamlessly navigating the digital world.

Some common digital accessibility considerations include:

✔ Adding descriptions to non-decorative images for those using a screen reader

✔ Using sufficient color contrast for easier reading, especially for those who are colorblind

✔ Captioning video files for those who are deaf or hard of hearing, or people in a noisy environment, like an airport

✔ Allowing the option to turn off animation, which can affect people with seizure disorders, and may be distracting for others

✔ Ensuring users can access all sections and content of a webpage using only the keyboard, which supports those with motor disabilities

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Why does it matter?

1

It's the law

From 2018 – 2020, plaintiffs in the U.S. filed more than 7,800 web-related accessibility lawsuits

more on page 5

2

It's good for brand

Workplaces that prioritize the needs of individuals with disabilities improve their employee success, retention rates, and loyalty.

more on page 6

3

It's good for business

The World Health Organization estimates there are one billion people worldwide living with a disability, representing trillions of dollars in purchasing power.

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Why does it matter? *(continued)*

1

It's the law

There's serious legal risk associated with inaccessible content. From 2018 – 2020, plaintiffs in the U.S. filed <u>more than 7,800 web-related accessibility lawsuits,</u> and we're witnessing <u>the numbers steadily grow</u>. These numbers don't include the suspected hundreds of thousands of legal demand letters also served every year. The majority of these suits claim violation of Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and U.S. Courts are overwhelmingly ruling in favor of accessibility.

In addition to the ADA, there are various global mandates that make it clear: **fail to make your digital experiences accessible, and you'll face legal risk.**

Why does it matter? *(continued)*

2

It's good for brand

Organizations that choose to make their digital assets accessible demonstrate they are prioritizing inclusivity by considering the needs of individuals with disabilities. More and more, many of these organizations are formalizing their commitment to DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) initiatives. Digital accessibility is a critical component of these initiatives for both internal and external stakeholders.

Internally, workplaces that prioritize the needs of individuals with disabilities improve their employee success, retention rates, and loyalty.

They equip team members with the accessible technology tools needed to do their jobs, ultimately leading to greater individual success and a deepening commitment to a company that cares. And these employees are vocal about brands that prioritize their needs, further enhancing a brand's public reputation.

Externally, consumers are increasingly loyal to brands that share their values of equity and inclusion. They're more willing to spend their money with these brands, and they're more likely to share their positive experiences with others.

Why does it matter? *(continued)*

3

It's good
for business

Serving the needs of this growing market is not only a moral imperative, it's smart business. The World Health Organization estimates there are one billion people worldwide living with a disability. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention puts that number at about one quarter of all U.S. adults, and these numbers don't include the fact that we are all aging into disability. With an accessible website, companies open their products and services to a much larger consumer audience who, along with their friends and family, represent trillions of dollars in purchasing power.

These organizations also open their job opportunities to a wider pool of talent. When hiring and recruiting practices are accessible, more individuals can apply for, and advance in employment.

What solution capabilities should you look for?

So, how do you make your website accessible, serving the needs of every visitor and keeping your business compliant with applicable accessibility legislation?
There are must-have capabilities as you evaluate solution providers.

For example, it may be tempting to think accessibility is a developer-only responsibility, and that changes to code will solve the problem. Accessibility is actually much more complex, involving cross-departmental understanding and adoption. It spans program managers, designers, content authors, QA testers, and more.

A thorough solution leverages the best of technology with accessibility expertise. A provider should not only have the tech to integrate with the way your team works, it should have a bench of experts who can advise on accessible design, provide technical guidance to fix code-level errors, support with any legal action taken against your organization, and provide ongoing training to upskill your in-house team.

Capabilities

Accessibility auditing and testing: Understanding whether an experience is accessible requires a combination of automated scanning and expert evaluation. Scanners can identify a percentage of errors. Identifying the others requires a manual evaluation, done by individuals using assistive technology. The most trustworthy providers include people with disabilities among these evaluators. A manual audit is the result of this evaluation, and includes a critical path analysis to ensure the entire customer journey is accessible.

Governance and reporting: A centralized platform will enable you to govern your accessibility work more easily, creating a system of record that tracks progress over time. Such a platform should provide high-level visibility to a portfolio of assets, as well as detailed dashboards and reports aggregating the results of any testing and evaluation done on a single site.

Project management: A solution should integrate with your existing systems, like Jira. It should support task management, instead of making it more complex. When accessibility work is synced with your familiar workflows, you can create clear process maps with ownership, tracking deadlines, and deliverables.

Developer tooling and integration: A solution should provide the tooling and integration to make accessibility work as streamlined and simple as possible. These integrations will improve productivity, increasing the pace at which you ship accessible code, and helping you meet time-to-market goals.

Legal expertise: When you receive a complaint, demand letter, or lawsuit, it's vital to evaluate its claims to determine the best next steps. Look for a partner who can provide this important legal assessment, and one that understands the complexities of accessibility standards and applicable legal regulations to ensure you maintain compliance.

Capabilities *(continued)*

Program management: It's important to create clear structure and organizational clarity when it comes to your commitment to accessibility. A partner will help establish an enterprise policy that supports organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs as well as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives.

Accessibility documentation: The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are the global technical standard for web accessibility. They were created and have been updated over time by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). WCAG conformance statements for non-product websites indicate how a site aligns with a standard, such as WCAG 2.1 AA. A VPAT® (Voluntary Product Accessibility Template) details a software product or platform's level of WCAG conformance, aligning with specific WCAG criteria.

Your digital accessibility partner needs to know how to accurately complete these documents, as well as help you produce an accessibility statement, and should provide coaching for their use in legal, procurement, or regulatory situations.

Training: The key to maintaining an accessible site or app is ongoing education. From designers to authors to developers, each team member should be incorporating accessibility best practices in their respective workflows. Look for a partner with education and training options for your team. A strong offering will be delivered through an easy-to-use learning management system (LMS) and provide on-demand learning opportunities including general accessibility training as well as customized education streams for each job function.

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Types of accessibility providers

There are a variety of accessibility solution providers on the market today offering varying levels of service and support. Most excel in one area. For example, some solutions provide an automated scanning capability only. Others rely on technology to attempt to fix a percentage of identified issues. Consultants provide a more thorough evaluation, but each of these providers lacks a truly comprehensive approach. A comprehensive solution will equip you with all the tools, technology, and training needed for ongoing accessibility.

As you evaluate your business needs, it's important to understand the capabilities (and potential limitations) of each type of provider:

Automated scanners:

An automated testing tool is an important component of a digital accessibility audit. It enables you to scan and report on your digital asset's accessibility issues. This report will flag certain accessibility barriers and their severity, and often includes an overall accessibility health score. Your score can serve as a baseline as you track your accessibility improvements over time.

However, there are limitations with automated testing tools. When you scan your asset's code, automation on its own is only able to identify approximately 30 percent of the WCAG success criteria, the technical standards that determine whether a digital experience is accessible. This leaves about 70 percent of accessibility success criteria undetected and, therefore, unresolved. Additionally, an automated test may report an issue that is ultimately determined to be a false positive—that is, not an actual barrier to access at all.

So, while automated testing is a nice starting point to identify a percentage of an asset's accessibility errors, it's just one capability and not a stand-alone solution. A comprehensive evaluation should include manual testing done by professionals using assistive technology, including individuals with disabilities.

Types of accessibility providers *(continued)*

Overlays:

Overlay vendors claim they can ensure accessibility compliance by adding a single line of JavaScript to an asset. An automated tool on their server then scans the asset's code for errors, making automatic fixes by "overlaying" new code on top of the original code.

Here's the problem: an overlay is automated, similar to an automated testing tool. It can only detect a fraction of WCAG success criteria and then can only "fix" a subset of those issues. And even those criteria detected and "fixed" may not be fixed properly. As an example, an overlay may suggest missing alternative text for an image so that it can be described by a screen reader or used as a comprehension aide. But there's no way to know if that text is meaningful or accurate. Even the most advanced automation simply isn't capable of delivering the value overlay vendors claim.

Based on their technical limitations, there are significant warnings from the market against choosing overlays. Plaintiff's law firms <u>are explicitly targeting companies that use overlays</u>, stating they're a signal the company knew it

had a problem but chose an incomplete approach. More than 600 accessibility experts have also <u>signed a petition calling for the removal of overlays</u> as a market solution. And The National Federation for the Blind <u>released a statement</u> recommending against their use.

A note about plugins, widgets, and toolbars:

When installing an overlay, a vendor may also offer a clickable toolbar to be made available on your website. That toolbar will contain a menu of features users can engage to do things like change the font on a page, alter the size of the font, adjust the color contrast, and more.

This approach can force people with disabilities to abandon their preferred assistive technology and learn yet another tool in order to seamlessly engage with your content. It also fails to fix the accessibility issues in the code. Tools that only alter the visual appearance of your digital asset don't address the real issues that impact users of assistive technology.

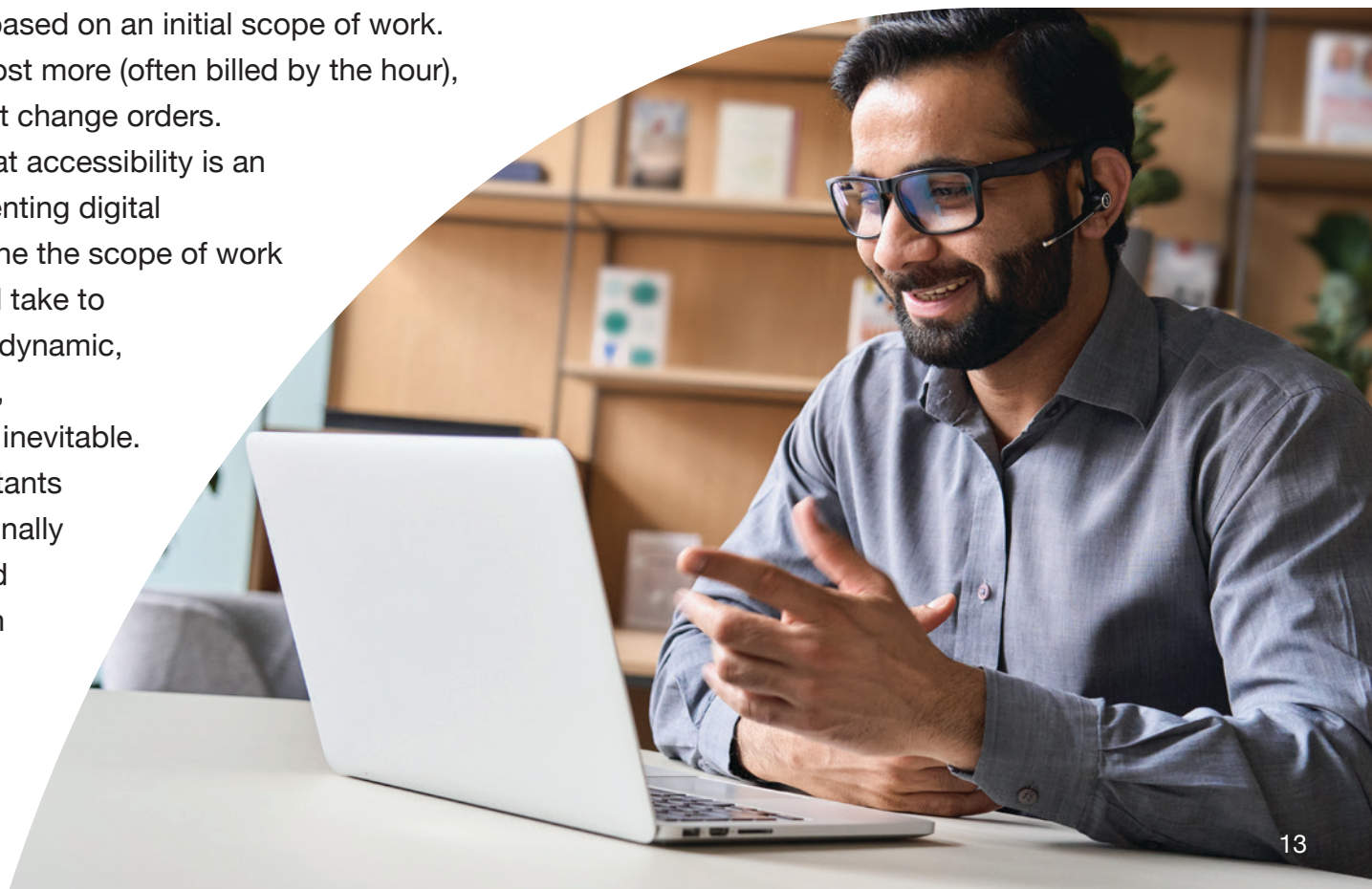# Types of accessibility providers *(continued)*

Consultants:

Consultants are capable of providing comprehensive accessibility support and training. However, this solution can become unsustainable due to consultants' expensive and unpredictable pricing structures.

Consultants structure their services based on an initial scope of work. Any additional support needed will cost more (often billed by the hour), require new negotiations, and warrant change orders. The problem with this approach is that accessibility is an ongoing process. When first implementing digital accessibility, it can be difficult to define the scope of work required or how many hours it should take to accomplish your goals. And with the dynamic, ever-changing nature of web content, unforeseeable and additional work is inevitable. As a result, those who rely on consultants wind up paying much more than originally anticipated or budgeted, and can find themselves completely dependent on these external providers.

Types of accessibility providers *(continued)*

Comprehensive solution:

A comprehensive, full-service solution will centralize accessibility management on a single software platform, equipping you and your team with a suite of software and services to maintain the accessibility of your digital assets over time.

Software:

- Automated scanning capabilities with always-on monitoring

- Unified reporting, bringing together results from both automated and manual testing

- System of record to track accessibility progress over time

- Easy-to-use dashboard providing complete visibility across your portfolio of assets

- Tooling and integration to sync with existing systems and workflows

Services:

- Manual evaluation by professionals using assistive technology, including individuals with disabilities

- Critical path analysis to ensure your user flows are barrier-free

- Guidance and support as you fix identified errors

- Ongoing training to better enable your team as new issues are introduced

- In-house legal support to evaluate any legal action taken against you, whether a legal demand letter or lawsuit, validate the complaint, and help with a response

- Accessibility governance support to build robust policies and programs for management across your enterprise

Without this comprehensive approach, you're making trade-offs when it comes to the technical and service-level support you will receive, which will impact the accessibility of your digital assets.

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Questions to ask

Getting clear, straightforward answers to key questions will help you determine which type of vendor partner to choose, guiding you to a partner that is both thorough and reliable in their approach. Here are 13 foundational questions to consider in your purchasing conversations:

Q What types of assets can you help make accessible—websites, mobile apps, PDFs, software, digital products, widgets?

A Make sure the solution can provide accessibility support for every type of digital asset, as well as your future needs.

Q Do you perform manual testing using assistive technology as well as testing by people with disabilities?

A Human evaluation is critical when it comes to understanding your state of accessibility. Only testing by accessibility experts, including people with disabilities, and using multiple assistive technologies, can accurately determine whether an experience is accessible for your users.

Q Do you help me prioritize the errors I need to fix?

A Results from automated scans and manual analysis of your user flows should be delivered coherently in a manner that helps you prioritize issues based on severity and impact to your users.

Q Can you fix my errors for me?

A The most efficient, effective, and secure approach to fixing errors is for those who own the code to also own fixing it. A partner should provide code-level guidance for internal teams to make the necessary adjustments themselves. This approach is more secure because it prevents third-party access to your code, and it builds up internal expertise and understanding for sustainable accessibility. Without this approach, when building new features, these same teams will re-introduce previously resolved issues because they have not fully learned how to build with accessibility in mind.

Questions to ask *(continued)*

Q **Do you provide ongoing support through every phase of the development lifecycle?**

A Fixing errors once a product, website, or app is live leads to costly, inefficient work (and re-work), and it creates risk as users are exposed to barriers. A partner should be able to assist with every stage of the experience lifecycle, from designing to coding to testing to authoring.

Q **How does your solution integrate with my current systems and processes?**

A Ensure that your partner can align with your existing development processes and technologies. For example, can they sync identified issues with the project management tools you're already using, like Jira and Azure DevOps? Can they operate at the same pace as your development teams, timing with your sprint cycles?

Q **Do you have a legal team to help me if I receive a demand letter or lawsuit?**

A A partner should have an internal team that understands global digital accessibility standards as well as how they relate to case law trends and legal regulations. These experts should help validate any legal claims against you and provide support to avoid future risk.

Q **What is your pricing structure?**

A Clearly understand if all tools, technology, services, and access to subject matter experts will be included in a quoted price or if they will be billed separately, including whether change orders will be required to solve the problem.

If a vendor is billing by the hour, clearly understand their rate and how they determine the number of hours needed for auditing and remediation support.

Questions to ask *(continued)*

Q How many of my users will have access to the platform?

A You should be given platform access for as many users as needed to make your asset accessible. Clearly understand if a vendor is charging per user seat, and if so, how much each seat will cost.

Q Will I be working with a dedicated team?

A A dedicated team will be familiar with your accessibility objectives, your assets, and progress made over time.

If a vendor does provide a dedicated team, it's important to understand each member's area of expertise and how often you will have access to them.

Q What type of accessibility training do you make available to my internal team?

A On-demand and live training opportunities should be tailored to specific job functions and included as part of a comprehensive package (not billed separately by individual seat).

Q How does your solution support multisite or multi-product management?

A A comprehensive dashboard should aggregate all your brand's digital properties into a single, easy-to-action view.

Q Do you help with the creation of an organization-wide accessibility policy?

A A partner should help you create and implement an accessibility policy. This policy will establish clear structure, organizational clarity, and accountability when it comes to your overall commitment to accessibility.

Internal alignment

Commitment to accessibility is a shared responsibility, and cannot be owned by a single person, section or department. Ensuring organizational buy-in is a key step in the journey of engaging an accessibility partner. It's important you connect and align with key internal team members. Here are some key points to guide your conversations:

CEO

A commitment to accessibility as part of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, protects brand values, mitigates legal risk, and expands your potential consumer market.

CFO

An investment in an accessibility solution reduces the risk of a potentially costly lawsuit, improves time-to-value and time-to-market, and supports inclusive HR initiatives throughout your organization.

CPO / Head of Product

As more businesses incorporate accessibility standards, new sales and contract renewals are increasingly tied to an ability to demonstrate product accessibility. Adopting accessibility early into the development lifecycle minimizes costs, and accessible products support revenue growth.

CMO / Head of eCommerce

An accessible digital experience is one that's usable to every customer, expanding market potential. Accessibility also positions a brand positively, earning the business of customers who save their loyalty for brands that share their values of inclusion and equity.

Once a vendor is selected, establishing an overarching culture of accessibility and inclusion will most certainly involve collaboration with other internal teams and key players beyond those listed above. For example, as your company creates new digital assets – whether websites, apps, or software – product and design teams will need to be thinking about inclusive design experiences and accessible UX/UI early and often in the development lifecycle.

Competitive advantage

Forrester estimates that <u>organizations will invest $10 billion annually</u> on digital accessibility as part of their overall customer experience operations. The magnitude of this investment speaks to the underlying value of achieving and maintaining digital accessibility. And there are several factors driving a renewed sense of urgency.

First, it's the law. Disability inclusion is a civil rights matter under the ADA and other similar global mandates. Corporations are required to ensure that their products and services are fully accessible to everyone, without discrimination.

Second, organizations have renewed their commitments to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, increasing their investments in these areas. Digital accessibility is about meeting the needs of every individual and supporting the way in which they experience your online content. It's one concrete, practical way to uphold a commitment to equity and inclusion.

Third, digital accessibility is a competitive advantage. There are more than one billion people worldwide that identify as having a disability, and this group represents $8 trillion in annual disposable income. It's critical for every organization to make sure the cost and effort put into creating a digital experience pays off, reaching its full audience. From commerce to talent acquisition to employee retention, a commitment to digital accessibility ensures that you're serving the needs of everyone.

Finally, a commitment to digital access enhances—and protects—your brand. Consumers expect companies to live their shared values, and they're increasingly vocal about brands that do. If your values are aligned, you win their business. If they discover you're on the receiving end of a discrimination lawsuit, they'll likely opt for your more accessible competitor.

Innovative solution

eSSENTIAL Accessibility was founded to make the digital world accessible for all.
We've created a balanced blend of software + managed services to make digital experiences accessible at a predictable annual price.

The eSSENTIAL Accessibility offering is built on the foundational capabilities necessary to support a successful, sustainable digital accessibility program. Our all-in-one solution includes:

▸ **eSSENTIAL Accessibility Platform:** an integrated software platform with centralized access to advanced tooling, technology, reporting, and portfolio management.

▸ **Accessibility testing and auditing:** scanning and continuous monitoring for WCAG conformance, as well as expert review of experiences and critical flows. Tests are performed by professionals using assistive technology, including people with disabilities.

▸ **Remediation guidance:** recommendations for remediating issues, whether they apply to design, code, or authoring.

▸ **System of record:** a historical record showing the status of digital accessibility issues and progress toward addressing them.

▸ **Project management:** facilitating support for assigning and tracking remediation efforts, with seamless integration with systems like Jira and Azure DevOps.

▸ **Developer suite:** tools for engineering and content teams to maintain quality accessible experiences and integrate automated accessibility testing into their digital experience lifecycle.

▸ **Legal guidance:** an expert in-house legal team to validate demand letters and litigation, draft accessibility statements, support litigation response, and advise based on the current legal/case law landscape.

▸ **Program management:** guidance and training to establish an enterprise policy that aligns with DEI and ESG initiatives, with education to engrain accessibility best-practices and compliance into your organizational culture and business processes.

▸ **Training and enablement:** on-demand education paths by job function, design/development/content coaching, and customized course offerings.

Ready when you are

Take the first step toward comprehensive digital accessibility compliance. Request a demo of the eSSENTIAL Accessibility solution today.

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essentialaccessibility.com