

Good to Great

Evolution of the Great Lakes Digital Accessibility Program

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Accessibility Architects

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About Us

The Great Lakes Accessibility Team

- Marc Thorson
- Stacy Carston
- We support hundreds of developers and their agile teams with the goal of continually providing state-of-the-art products and services that are accessible to everyone.

Great Lakes Educational Loan Services, Inc.

- 50+ years of supporting student loan services for millions of borrowers and thousands of schools and lenders
- Technology-centric company focused on doing what's right
- Recently acquired by Nelnet

Good accessibility is a checklist.

Great accessibility is a culture.

LESSON 1

Good accessibility is a checklist.

We all have to start somewhere! Might as well start with enforcing an accessibility checklist in your software development lifecycle.

Initially, our developers found it difficult to understand what it truly meant to be compliant:

- WCAG 2.0 is a rather large and complex spec with 61 different success criteria.
- It's not easy for the uninitiated!

To make the transition more comfortable for developers, we introduced our own streamlined accessibility checklist.

- Simplified, plain language translation of our WCAG 2.0 AA requirements
- Greater emphasis on criteria that regularly impact us, e.g. form field accessibility, and less emphasis on criteria that infrequently impacts us, e.g. multimedia accessibility.

Great accessibility is a culture.

Building and maintaining accessibility awareness with checklists and other quality control processes is good, but to take it to the next level, accessibility needs to be embraced as a natural part of everything an organization does.

- In other words, accessibility as a skill set AND as a mindset

Some ways Great Lakes has made accessibility part of its culture:

- Emphasizing how accessibility correlates to our core mission
- Seeking advocates in all business units and at all levels of our company
- Focusing on quality

Emphasize how accessibility correlates to the company's mission/vision

EAC's mission/vision:

- Customer first. Excellence. Trust. Caring.

Great Lakes' mission/vision:

- Doing what's right to change lives for the better.

Nelnet's mission/vision:

- To empower our customers to achieve their dreams.

Accessibility is all about helping customers — each and every one of them!

Seeking advocates in all business units and at all levels

Introduce yourself! Don't be afraid to talk about your disability or why you are so passionate about accessibility.

- To truly understand the value of accessibility, people need a way to relate to it somehow.

Talk to management and work hard with them to get them on the right path.

- When executives and leaders are enlightened about the benefits of accessibility and are promoting it, it's easier to motivate everyone.

Find a way to raise awareness to all staff.

- Great Lakes has incorporated a training module all employees are required to take each year.

Focusing on quality

Accessibility is very much a quality assurance type of activity.

Customers demand quality; engineers demand quality.

Excellence. Trust. Caring.

- Performance. Security. Accessibility.

A company focused on quality should be a company willing to focus on accessibility.

Good accessibility is standards compliant code.

Great accessibility is enlightened presentation-layer development.

LESSON 2

Good accessibility is standards compliant code.

Good accessibility is good code. Anything less is bad code.

Truly understanding the languages of the web goes a long way toward being able to produce an accessible webpage.

- Developers proficient in HTML, CSS, and JavaScript have the shortest learning curve to becoming accessibility experts.

Accessibility checking tools should be a part of every front-end developer's arsenal.

- Deque aXe, WebAIM WAVE, Total Validator, etc.
- Contrast checking tools like TPG Colour Contrast Analyser

Great accessibility is enlightened presentation-layer development

Truly creating a world-class, accessible product depends on top-notch developers and designers.

- Sometimes creating a fancy widget that looks great, sounds great in screen reader, operates effectively with a keyboard, and is intuitive and relatively easy for everyone to understand is hard!

Fortunately, software engineers are perfectionists.

- Accessibility rules give front-end professionals a good reason to be perfect.

Some ways Great Lakes has enlightened our presentation-layer developers and designers:

- Creating empathy by giving everyone instant access to assistive technology
- Making accessibility a career path
- Embracing patterns and automation

Creating empathy by giving everyone access to assistive technology

To understand someone, you must first walk a mile in their moccasins.

- One of the best early decisions we ever made was encouraging all our developers to install and experiment with the NVDA screen reader.
- With 10 minutes of training, developers can learn the basics of using the screen reader's virtual cursor, navigating by headings, and simple form interaction.

Using screen readers, speech recognition, magnification software, etc. enables a much more meaningful benchmark.

- Developing or designing a complex interface that you can prove works in a screen reader, for example, is a very satisfying accomplishment and helps pave the way toward a truly accessible user experience.

Making accessibility a career path

Working in the field of accessibility is challenging, fun, and rewarding.

Great Lakes recognized the importance of accessibility and created “Accessibility Architect” positions.

- Experienced front-end developers can choose to take the accessibility path when positions become available.

Genuine accessibility positions allow us to deal with accessibility matters both tactically and strategically.

- It’s harder to be strategic without having a position 100% dedicated to accessibility matters.

Embracing patterns and automation

Pattern libraries are a more efficient, effective way to produce consistently effective UI components.

- Don't reinvent the accessible wheel

Repeatedly checking your content with semi-automated accessibility checking tools as well as verifying the experience when using assistive technology is critical, but they can take a lot of time.

- Automate as much as you can.
- Make it part of the build process.
- Make it part of your unit tests.
- The sky is the limit!

Good accessibility is an accessibility expert.

Great accessibility is one well-trained new hire after another.

LESSON 3

Good accessibility is an accessibility expert.

Accessibility can be complicated. Building expertise is critical.

- An accessibility expert is a necessary asset for helping a company understand compliance standards and providing guidance to all relevant stakeholders to meet these technical and legal requirements.
- Working with a human expert is a much easier way to get help than combing through WCAG documentation.

Accessibility experts can provide incredibly helpful product evaluations and recommendations.

Accessibility experts can point out flaws in design and potentially save on future development cost which would have been necessary to fix such flaws later.

Great accessibility is one well-trained new hire after another.

No matter how awesome an accessibility expert might be, he/she can't do it all!

- Accessibility is a team game. Everyone needs to play a role.

Some ways Great Lakes has built accessibility expertise throughout the company:

- Requiring accessibility training during employee onboarding
- Accessibility Jedi Council
- ADA Hackathon

Requiring accessibility training during employee onboarding

A product's accessibility is only as good as the skill set and awareness of the newest recruit working on the product.

Providing in-house training has been critical for our organization.

- All staff are required to complete a basic accessibility training module so they are aware of the rules and regulations as well as the value of doing things right.
- Developers are required to participate in more advanced sessions.

Accessibility Jedi Council

Our Accessibility Jedi Council is a grassroots subcommittee of volunteers throughout our organization who periodically discuss accessibility concerns and ideas for improvement.

Anyone is welcome at any experience level.

- Developers, designers, management, legal, etc.
- Accessibility is all about diversity, so a good mix of ideas is a plus.
- Heavy focus on UI/UX since most accessibility matters revolve around the front end.

Jedi Council members are our champions of accessibility in their respective divisions/departments/product teams who help promote knowledge sharing and doing things right throughout the organization.

ADA Hackathon

Hosting accessibility events within an organization helps to keep people motivated.

- And it's fun!

One of our most successful accessibility events was our ADA Hackathon.

- One-day event, participation optional.
- Attendees didn't have to dedicate the entire day.
- Combination of training sessions and developers actually getting together and coding a bunch of handpicked issues on the backlog.

Summary of Lessons Learned

GOOD ACCESSIBILITY

Checklist

Standards-compliant code

Accessibility expert

GREAT ACCESSIBILITY

Culture

Enlightened presentation-layer development

One well-trained new hire after another

Questions?

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