WHITE PAPER

Unlocking equity for all: Prioritizing digital accessibility in government

June 2023
By Diego Bernardo, Suchen Huang, Hillary Wool, Kelly O'Connor, Karen Lellouche Tordjman, Neveen Awad and Crosby Kapp

Unlocking equity for all: Prioritizing digital accessibility in government

From obtaining social security to applying for a driver's license and filing taxes, government services are an integral part of our everyday lives. But long gone are the days when citizens could expect to take a number and wait their turn to be served at a walk-up counter.

Government has lagged behind other consumer industries like tech and retail, in going digital. But spurred by new demands during the pandemic, government agencies at all levels rapidly digitized their historically paper-based processes and services. A BCG survey in 2020 found that 80% of government agencies said COVID-19 accelerated the need for digital transformation.

But in the rush to drive digital transformation, accessibility for people with disabilities (PwD) hasn't always been a top priority across all digital initiatives. While moving government services and programs online has improved efficiency and enhanced the citizen experience for a large percentage of the population, people with disabilities often face barriers to accessing such digital services.

As 27% of Americans — more than one in four — have some kind of disability, it is critical that PwD are considered in the design of digital public services. Yet that hasn't always been the case. One of the reasons for this is that "people with disabilities" refers to an extremely diverse group of individuals, all with varying needs. From vision impairments to chronic illnesses to neurological divergences, there are a wide range of conditions that meet the definition of "disability" that agencies must take into account. When applying for benefits, for example, overly complicated language can impact accessibility for the 12.8% of Americans with cognitive difficulties. Failing to add alt-text to images means that the 4.8% of Americans with vision impairments can't access the information on a flowchart detailing the steps in an application process.

Improving accessibility should also be more than a box-ticking compliance exercise. Millions of Americans living with a disability depend on being able to access essential government services online — without barriers. From applying for permits to enrolling in Medicaid to filing court documents, every service should be optimized for better customer experience (CX) and equity for all.

With accessibility rights for PwD largely originating from the federal government — such as through the introduction of the ADA and Rehabilitation Act — government agencies are well-positioned to lead the transformation to a more inclusive digital world. Now is the time to build on the momentum of digitization in the public sector — and remove roadblocks that prevent citizens with disabilities from accessing newly digitized essential services — by ensuring accessibility in design.

Barriers to Digital Inclusion in the Public Sector

As digital government services become more prevalent, adhering to accessibility best practices, guidelines, and regulations — like Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 — is increasingly critical. To provide practical guidance on how to meet these requirements, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) even published web accessibility guidance in 2022.

So, with such specific guidance available to government agencies, what's getting in the way of implementing accessible digital products, content, and services?

Across all levels of government, it can be a challenge to ensure coordination and standardization. Often, agencies have different legacy systems, processes, data, and IT infrastructure. As a result, online access to government services rarely offers the same user experience as the private sector.

Sometimes, it's simply hard to know which of the many standards or regulations apply. If the guidelines are too generic, knowing how to implement them becomes difficult. Or if they lack clarity, it's hard to know where to start. At the same time, technology is constantly changing, making it challenging to ensure that updates and solutions are always accessible.

Ensuring equitable access is also a fairly time-consuming and manual process. Most automated solutions can only detect and resolve a small percentage of accessibility errors, leaving the rest needing human touch.

Overcoming these barriers isn't easy, but when the alternative is a poor citizen experience or, worse, citizens with disabilities being unable to access critical services — it's absolutely worth the effort.

The Importance of Accessible Online Public Services

Government services form a cornerstone in the lives of most Americans. But sometimes, those in most need of services or support — who may have varying levels of disability — are marginalized if they struggle to interact with digital technology.

By ensuring equitable access to digital services, government entities can advance their agency's mission and better support all of their constituents. Over time, this can promote online services to a larger and more inclusive user base, all of whom have equal access to services. Focusing on improving accessibility through the lens of the user experience also creates platforms with a high level of usability, improving the digital citizen experience for all.

"

By ensuring equitable access to digital services, government entities can advance their agency's mission and better support all of their constituents.

One example of digital accessibility done right is the IT Accessibility Policy Framework, designed to help agencies assess the level of accessibility information that their policies might require. It's also possible to take inspiration from government agencies that have already made accessibility updates aimed at their users. VA.gov, for example, has incorporated plain language guidelines into its design system to make information more *cognitively* accessible — particularly for people with intellectual, developmental, and learning disabilities.

Designing services and content with accessibility top of mind like the examples above can also drive efficiency and cost savings. Potential complaints and lawsuits can be avoided while boosting engagement and offering a frictionless way for all citizens to get the information or services they need. Beyond risk mitigation, accessible design also offers an opportunity to reinforce public trust and confidence in government.

Accessibility drives innovation, and once embedded in systems and processes, many agencies find the benefits often positively impact all citizens — not just those with disabilities.

Practical Ways To Improve Digital Accessibility

At BCG X, the tech build and design unit of BCG, we have significant experience in helping government agencies move beyond pure accessibility compliance — and toward becoming leaders in creating accessible, inclusive digital products. When getting started, here are five steps we recommend:

1. Embed accessibility considerations into initial designs

   Getting familiar with the latest WCAG guidelines and principles as early as possible will help you get ahead of the curve and embed accessible design best practices into your site or application from the start. Following the principles of human-centered design (HCD) enables the creation of intuitive and accessible services designed with your users front and center. Keeping this in mind from the beginning helps determine the pain points that are most important to your users, rather than basing your improvements on assumptions.

   The U.S. Web Design System (USWDS) is also a helpful starting point for agencies beginning down the path to greater accessibility. It provides principles, guidance, and code to help agencies design and build accessible, mobile-friendly government websites and digital services.

2. Design in partnership with PwD

   Formative research and usability testing are vital to product development. By involving end users in every step of the process — from concept ideation to iterations and usability testing — you can proactively account for their needs. UX research should represent users with different types of disabilities to ensure any design accommodates as broad a range as possible.

   And don't forget that improving accessibility is an ongoing process that requires feedback loops. You need an easy way for users to submit accessibility feedback — and a process to review and implement that feedback. VA.gov, for example, provides a way for individuals to report accessibility issues directly on their website.

3. Start small

Government services websites are often extremely complex, consisting of multiple user flows. Sometimes, the level of accessibility updates these require can feel overwhelming. And more often than not, this means change doesn't happen at all. When improving existing pages, focus on starting small. It's also essential to be transparent on your progress. Share with constituents what you've done to improve accessibility and what your future goals are — even if the overall accessibility initiative will take months or years to achieve.

Whether adjusting the contrast between the text and background colors, writing more explicit instructions using plain language, or adding alt-text to the images on a page, these are small steps that can significantly impact accessibility. While making these changes, incorporate usability testing to ensure the changes are making an impact. Starting small makes it much easier to scale this practice next time because you already have a process to follow.

4. Test early and often

Many users who experience disabilities rely on various assistive technologies, from screen readers and magnifiers to speech recognition and mobile accessibility solutions. Testing designs as early and as often as possible means it's easier to confirm whether the content and interactions within a government website are inclusive to all. Tools like Assistiv Labs and Accessible Web can test the compatibility of an interface with the assistive technologies users rely on.

If accessibility isn't considered and tested during the product development stage, the cost of retrospectively fixing any issues that arise will be far more significant.

5. Leverage the technology and vendors that can help

Government agencies often use legacy technologies that aren't built for innovation and accessibility, making it challenging to enhance accessibility in design. Finding the right experts to help validate design solutions and technology is a key step, and these will often be external vendors with significant experience in the accessibility space.

With experience around all stages of improving accessibility, the right vendor can manage your project and lead the design, development, user research, and testing of any updates. With the right combination of technology and vendors, agencies can move beyond compliance to become leaders in digital inclusion and equity.

Inclusive Design Opens Up Accessibility

For many years, accessibility updates tended to focus on a relatively small range of disabilities, and the majority of government agencies ensured their digital services catered to these. But, as the definition of accessibility broadens to cover a wider range of citizens — the opportunity is there to make more adjustments.

To move the needle on accessibility even further, it's time to proactively move towards a human-centered design approach. Doing so ensures that government digital services not only exceed minimum regulatory requirements but also promote equitable digital access, helping government agencies deliver on their mission and serve all their constituents equally.

Boston Consulting Group

Boston Consulting Group partners with leaders in business and society to tackle their most important challenges and capture their greatest opportunities. BCG was the pioneer in business strategy when it was founded in 1963. Today, we work closely with clients to embrace a transformational approach aimed at benefiting all stakeholders—empowering organizations to grow, build sustainable competitive advantage, and drive positive societal impact.

Our diverse, global teams bring deep industry and functional expertise and a range of perspectives that question the status quo and spark change. BCG delivers solutions through leading-edge management consulting, technology and design, and corporate and digital ventures. We work in a uniquely collaborative model across the firm and throughout all levels of the client organization, fueled by the goal of helping our clients thrive and enabling them to make the world a better place.

BCG X

BCG X is the tech build & design unit of BCG.

Turbocharging BCG's deep industry and functional expertise, BCG X brings together advanced tech knowledge and ambitious entrepreneurship to help organizations enable innovation at scale.

With nearly 3,000 technologists, scientists, programmers, engineers, and human-centered designers located across 80+ cities, BCG X builds and designs platforms and software to address the world's most important challenges and opportunities.

Teaming across our practices, and in close collaboration with our clients, our end-to-end global team unlocks new possibilities. Together we're creating the bold and disruptive products, services, and businesses of tomorrow.