



# Q&A on IT Accessibility

NASCIO Director of Policy & Research, Meredith Ward, recently sat down with Jay Wyant, Minnesota's Chief Information Accessibility Officer, to discuss the latest trends and issues in digital accessibility. Here's what he had to say:



## How did COVID-19 impact accessibility?

**The pandemic exposed some key issues facing people with disabilities.** Workarounds that depended on quick assistance from a friendly co-worker were suddenly unavailable, as employees with disabilities began teleworking at home offices.

Some key examples:

### Desktop support

Previously, a desktop support worker could visit an employee's cubicle to troubleshoot issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, that support worker had to connect with the employee virtually. Often, the collaboration tool on the employee's side was not accessible, or the desktop support worker's tools were incompatible with the employee's assistive technology (AT). In either case, everyone often found it difficult to resolve issues that previously would have been simple fixes.

Desktop support systems and software have become more accessible over the past few years, however, most of the improvements focus on the end user. This makes it hard to hire qualified people with disabilities to serve as support staff.

The good news is that the pandemic highlighted these issues for desktop support system vendors. We're already seeing improvements for both support staff and their end users, and we expect vendors will be more focused on accessibility as they update their offerings.

### Virtual meetings

Overnight, everyone began attending meetings from home offices. Online meeting software vendors ramped up their accessibility support, but for many employees, it was still months before they were able to effectively attend a meeting. Eighteen months later, employees still face certain challenges. The best solution continues to be for IT providers to learn from these efforts and include accessibility right at the beginning when they design their systems.

On the flip side, accessible virtual meetings became a net positive for many employees with disabilities. Employees with limited mobility found it easier to attend meetings. When multiple online tools improved captions support, some deaf and hard of hearing employees found it easier to track conversations in meetings.

There is still more work to do. Few online meeting tools do a good job integrating sign language interpreters. The quality of automated captions varies, especially if there are environmental sounds and other issues. As vendors move to the continuous update model,



they must work hard to ensure that updates introduce improvements without breaking past support for accessibility.

## Communication and data

A characteristic of the COVID-19 era is rapid change. Friday, everyone was at the office, then Monday, everyone was working from home. One day, no one at the grocery store had masks, and the next day, most people began wearing masks, and so on. It is incredibly important for state government to communicate the changing information, with accurate data, to the people they serve.

Many states rely on data visualization tools to explain what is happening, but if that information isn't accessible, many vulnerable citizens, including people with disabilities, can't easily understand the content.

Fortunately, the [federal COVID-19 site](#) is highly accessible, ranking above every state site. I'm proud to say that Minnesota is right behind them.

One factor in Minnesota's favor is that Minnesota's Community of Practice for accessible digital mapping practices had published [guidelines on accessible map design and creation](#), and the principles apply to nearly all data visualizations.



### How did the pandemic affect procurement practices?

**State government relies heavily on vendor-provided technology solutions.** This means vendors need to understand and support the obligations governments have regarding accessibility and usability (not to exclude security, data privacy, etc.).

The pandemic put a spotlight on this dependency. Suddenly governments needed tools – fast. Federal, state, and local governments needed to obtain, configure and launch vaccine registration, public health information and awareness, and other data-intensive tools. Processes that normally took months or even years now had to be done in weeks.

Accessibility remained a requirement, but there was little to no time to test or confirm. Even vendors with good track records struggled to ensure accessibility because they were either using new, unproven tools or dusting off old tools that had not yet been fully tested. Vendors with less experience with accessibility took months to learn and fix their issues – too late for many people with disabilities.

Governments have two general strategies to ensure that what they buy is accessible, especially in emergency situations. First, require the vendor to provide credible information about their product's accessibility and second, verify the vendor's statements and general support for accessibility.

### Buying accessibility

A popular term in digital accessibility circles is "shift left," or include accessibility earlier in any process – ideally from the very beginning. So how can government buyers identify vendors who provide accessible technology?

The Information Technology Industry Council, a trade group, publishes a set of [Voluntary Product Accessibility Templates \(VPATs®\)](#). Vendors use the VPATs to document how their products support each of the relevant accessibility criteria. For every criterion, the vendor can also provide explanatory remarks justifying their conformance claim.

In theory, asking commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) vendors to complete a VPAT should

give us good information. Unfortunately, many vendors still don't accurately describe how their technology supports accessibility. There are many reasons for this. Some vendors lack accessibility knowledge, and so are unable to accurately document their product's accessibility support. In other situations, the person completing the document is not the person who has the detailed technical knowledge of the product's accessibility.

Another challenge is that many vendors only provide information when they claim nonconformance. That is, when they claim conformance to an accessibility standard, they don't provide information in the comments section to explain that support. This is true of many companies who lead their industry in accessibility. As a result, procurement officials may end up looking at VPATs from multiple vendors that appear to show the same level of accessibility support, even though our experience tells us that one vendor is much better at accessibility than the other.

Selecting a vendor is just the start. The pandemic demonstrated the need for stronger enforcement for state contracts. If a vendor claims that their products are digitally accessible, but it's shown to be otherwise, there needs to be a way for the state and the vendor to come to a clear resolution - quickly.

### Scaling accessibility

**It's not enough for governments to require accessibility from vendors.** Smart vendors know that accessible technology is good business. As state government leaders, we need to encourage them to think about accessibility all the time - not just when they sell to government. Then we all benefit.

The next time you talk with a vendor who claims strong internal support for accessibility, be sure to ask them:

- What are they doing to make sure their own vendors provide accessible technology? Not all vendors build everything in-house.
- What are they using for payroll and other internal operations? Their vendors might be our vendors, too. The more pressure we put on the industry from more sources, the better.

What about technology other than COTS? Consider using other tools to evaluate how well vendors integrate digital accessibility standards in their work and products. Try asking questions about how they integrate accessibility into their planning and development efforts and consider using [PDAA](#) to have the vendor report on their accessibility maturity.

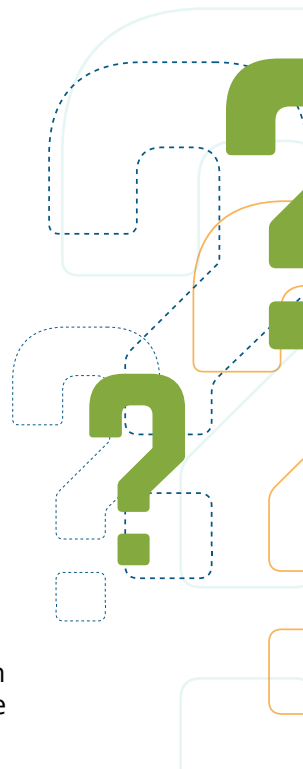
### Putting it all together

The other challenge we have is connecting all the processes. Once we purchase a technology solution, the project manager needs to validate the vendor's claims, and the contract manager shouldn't pay for the solution or service until everyone knows the solution and service meets the right standards. This sounds simple in theory, but in a state with over 70 agencies, boards, councils and commissions and thousands of contracts, it can be very hard to do.



#### Anything in the digital accessibility space that concerns you?

Digital accessibility has become much more visible in the last five years, and there's been a corresponding explosion in IT vendors who claim to provide quick fixes for inaccessible websites. One trend we have seen is when a vendor offers to resolve an issue using



overlays – usually by using javascript. These overlays can be useful as a stopgap measure while organizations work behind the scenes to fix underlying issues, but unfortunately, many overlay vendors present their technology as a permanent solution.

The solution? Don't use overlays at all and get to the root of the issue at the outset. Fix your website – even if it means a complete rebuild and communicate and stick to your plans. That will engender more support from accessibility advocates than a quick fix.



### What is your advice for states just starting their accessibility journey?

In Minnesota, we are lucky that accessibility advocates persuaded our state's legislature to pass a law in 2009 that mandated a state accessibility standard, which incorporated both Section 508 and WCAG 2.0 level AA – eight years before the federal government adopted WCAG 2.0. We have had a few years to make some mistakes and to do other things right, and based on our experience, we have a few recommendations:

#### Adopt a statewide policy – with teeth

**Make accessibility a policy for all government agencies.** We've had people say, "accessibility is an IT problem," therefore it's up to IT professionals to deal with it. On the contrary, **everyone** needs to be involved and held accountable – agencies who want the software/service need to require it be accessible, staff who create digital content need to make it accessible, and IT professionals need the skills and knowledge to support all this.

Even if the policy itself doesn't detail penalties for noncompliance, there are other avenues. One way we've been able to do this is by referencing our [Governor's executive order \(PDF\)](#) to increase hiring and retention rates of people with disabilities. The accessibility of state tools and software directly impact that metric.

#### Get funding that's tied to your policy

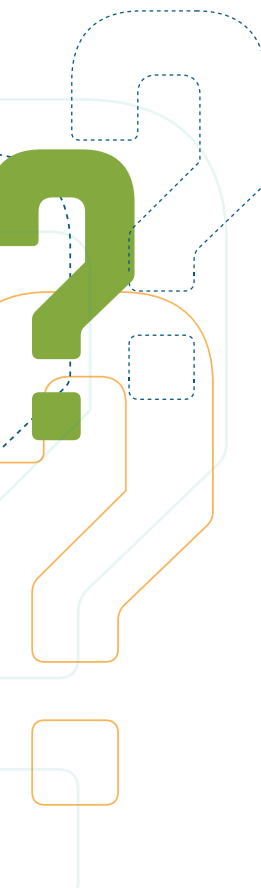
Accessibility is everyone's job, but it's important to designate someone (ideally a collective of someones) to help you increase awareness and understanding, plan and organize training, and help create processes and procedures for procurement, application design, development, testing and content creation.

Think of your accessibility program like you do your security program – both are risk-management programs that improve your state's ability to deliver critical services. Recruit and hire staff accordingly.

#### Collaborate with others

Don't let your accessibility champions get stuck in silos! Encourage everyone at your state who is passionate about accessibility to collaborate with others and encourage them to support each other – don't limit them to only work on projects in their department.

Minnesota IT Services' Office of Accessibility participates in monthly inter-state collaboration meetings, and we would welcome your state's digital accessibility lead to join us. [Contact me](#) to learn more about this opportunity and continue to look for opportunities to collaborate with new teams, departments and organizations to further a digitally accessible government for everyone.



## **Resources**

[State of Minnesota Office of Accessibility](#)  
[NASCIO: Accessibility in Procurement Part 1](#)  
[Accessibility In Procurement Part 2](#)

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