Event Date: February 6, 2019

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Host: Celestia Ohrazda, Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University

MARSHA: Hi, this is Marsha Schwanke, and you're listening to ADA live.

Music: [Car starting] Yo. [Car starting, helicopter whirling] [Music] [Car starting] All right, let's roll. Let's go. Wel-come to / Here we come [Music fades out].

CELESTIA: Good afternoon ADA Live! On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network, welcome to the 65th Episode of ADA Live! The topic of today's show is web accessibility.

My name is Celestia Ohrazda and I am the information design specialist for the Burton Blatt institute at Syracuse University. Today's speaker is Marsha Schwanke, a web developer for the Southeast ADA center.

In this episode, we're going to discuss the basics of web accessibility, including why it's important, the ADA and other federal laws, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, and some common barrier s to web access.

We will also share some resources that will help make your websites and digital materials more accessible and usable for a diverse audience.

ADA Live! listening audience, you can submit your questions about web accessibility at any time on ADAlive.org. Marsha, welcome to ADA Live!

MARSHA: Thank you, I'm honored to be here.

CELESTIA: We all know the Internet continues to dramatically impact our daily lives and how we work, play, and socialize. Businesses and government agencies routinely provide their information programs and services on websites and some are even completely on-line. As a result, websites are available anytime and anywhere 7 days a week, 24 hours a day.

However, just as buildings with steps and no ramps can prevent some people with disabilities from entering the building, the design of websites can also create unnecessary barriers for people with disabilities.

Marsha, can you explain to our listening audience what web accessibility is?

MARSHA: For starters, web accessibility is more than websites, it is also tools and technologies, such as e-mail, mobile applications, social media, and video. Web accessibility also extends to access to the content, including but not limited to Word documents, PDF files, and PowerPoint presentations. And web accessibility essentially means that people can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the web.

Keep in mind, that web accessibility is essential for people with disabilities and useful for all. At any time in your life, you can experience a disability, either temporarily or permanently. And as you age, the possibility of disability increases. The barriers in web access can be technology, situation, environment, and even attitudes.

CELESTIA: Wow, that seems like there's a lot of different aspects of web accessibility. It sounds like a huge undertaking. Where should I get started with web accessibility?

MARSHA: Well, understanding and planning for web accessibility should be included from the beginning and throughout the design and development process. Web accessibility is not a one-time check box, but it's a continual process with any website or technology updates, changes, and periodic reviews.

To get started, break web accessibility into three parts, basics, background, and barriers. Think of it like you're solving a jigsaw puzzle. Break web accessibility down into three types of pieces -- the corner pieces are the basics. The edge pieces are the background, the user experience, and the main content centerpieces of the puzzle are potential barriers.

First, look at the corner pieces, these are the basics. Why web accessibility is important, common terms in web access, the laws and legal requirements, and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines -- short for WCAG.

Second, look at the edge pieces, these are the background, the user experiences and perspectives, like disability, environment, aging, technology, and attitude. These user experiences frame the access to the content.

Third, look at the content centerpieces, these are potential barriers in web content and information, such as images, links, color, and contrast. Your content should always be assembled, designed, and developed from the start, and through continual awareness and evaluation by using the best practices and tools.

And listening audience, don't think that you need to know everything, there are lots of resources out there and available to you. You are just one piece of that puzzle. One part of the team.

CELESTIA: I love that analogy of the jigsaw puzzle to help us better understand web accessibility. Are there any guidelines for web accessibility? And if there are, who creates them and where can I find them?

MARSHA: The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, known as WCAG or "W-C-A-G" are developed by the Web Accessibility Initiative, the WAI of the World Wide Web Consortium, the W3C. The WCAG is a globally recognized technical standard for accessible web content.

CELESTIA: Marsha, if I understand correctly, the main guidelines for web accessibility are the WCAG guidelines. Can you tell me a little more about the WCAG and what the guidelines are?

MARSHA: Certainly, the WCAG has four principles referred to as POUR, the acronym, P-O-U-R.

P stands for perceivable -- users should be able to perceive the content using their available senses.

O stands for operable -- the website or web application and navigation should be operable using a variety of assistive technologies or adaptive strategies.

U stands for understandable -- users should be able to easily understand the content but also how to operate the website or web application.

R stands for robust -- the website or web application should be accessible in using a variety of assistive technologies and continue to be compatible as technology changes.

Furthermore, each of these POUR principles are broken down into guidelines that have testable success criteria. And these criteria are not technology specific but provide guidance on how to meet the guideline.

There are also three conformance levels ranging from level A, level AA, and level AAA. Conformance level A is the minimum needed for web accessibility. And AAA is the highest. The current recognized standard is WCAG2 level AA.

For more information on the WCAG, accessibility fundamentals, strategies and resources, visit the website for the W3C WAI.

CELESTIA: I can definitely see where web accessibility would benefit everyone. However, is web accessibility also a legal requirement? Does the Americans with Disabilities Act apply to websites also?

MARSHA: That's a good question, Celestia, and before I answer, though, a disclaimer -- I am not a lawyer. This is not legal advice, but rather information, technical guidance, and resources.

First of all, note that the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines that we just discussed are themselves not a law, but rather a globally recognized technical standard for accessible web content and the WCAG has been incorporated in some U.S. policies and U.S. federal and state laws, and also in some policies and laws around the world.

Web accessibility is even recognized as a basic human right in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, abbreviated as UN-CRPD.

In the United States, there are various federal laws that cover and apply to web accessibility. The Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA, is one of them. There is also, including but not limited to laws such as Section 504 on the Rehabilitation Act, Section 508, Section 508 Refresh. The Air Carrier Access Act, abbreviated ACAA. And the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, abbreviated -- CVAA.

In this podcast, we're going to focus on the Americans with Disabilities Act. The ADA is a broad anti-discrimination civil rights law for people with disabilities. The ADA was signed into law on July 26, 1990 by George H.W. Bush. The ADA was written before the internet was prevalent, so it contains no specific technical standards for web accessibility. However, the ADA does include the key principles of equality and fairness. Under the ADA, people with disabilities are entitled to effective communication, equal opportunity, and nondiscrimination.

There are five titles of the ADA.

- ADA Title I relates to employment.

- ADA Title II applies to state and local governments, the programs, activities, and services of public entities.

- ADA Title III applies to places of public accommodations and commercial facilities that are privately owned, leased, or operated, such as hotels, restaurants, banks, private schools, golf courses, health clubs, theaters, department store, and more.

- ADA Title IV applies to telecommunications.

- ADA Title V has some miscellaneous provisions.

And as far as the ADA goes, again, there are no technical standards for web accessibility. There were multiple attempts over the years of rule making and trying to develop technical standards, but to no avail.

And then in December of 2017, the Department of Justice announced an indefinite withdrawal of regulations and technical standards specifically about web accessibility. However, in the absence of any technical standards, again, it goes back to the ADA being about equality and fairness. Those effective communication, equal opportunity, and nondiscrimination requirements.

Also, the Department of Justice has stated that the ADA does apply to digital accessibility. This position was reinforced by the Department of Justice in a September 2018 statement issued in response to a bipartisan letter from Congress asking for clarification on web accessibility compliance requirements under the ADA.

For more information and links to that letter and response, check out the blog post on the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology abbreviated PEAT. And the PEAT website blog, references again, how the DOJ confirms websites are covered by the ADA.

The other thing is that the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are in some federal laws, such as the Section 508 and the Section 508 Refresh. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are also the recognized standards and cited in federal settlement agreements and other court cases concerning web accessibility.

Let's look at the titles of the ADA and consider some examples of how barriers in web accessibility can apply to each title.

Title I of the ADA relates to employment rights. For example, an on-line job application that can't be accessed using a screen reader by a person who is blind or has a visual disability.

And in Title II of the ADA, disability discrimination is prohibited in state and local governments and applies to state universities and colleges. An example, an on-line court that can't be navigated without the use of a mouse.

In Title III of the ADA prohibits disability discrimination by places of public accommodation, such as banks, hotels, museums, theaters, department stores, etc., that are privately owned. For example, the log-in form to my banking account on-line, I can't submit it because I can't see the required information because it's only in the color red.

And in Title IV of the ADA covers telecommunications in general. So, for example, on-line video I can't hear it because I am a person who is deaf and the video lacks closed captioning.

CELESTIA: Marsha, thank you for that overview of the laws focused on web accessibility and the great examples of how web accessibility applies to the various titles in the Americans with Disabilities Act. ADA Live! listening audience, if you have questions about web accessibility or any other topics, you can submit your questions any time on-line at ADAlive.org. Now a word from our sponsor, the National ADA Network.

VOICE OVER: The ADA National Network provides information, guidance and training on the Americans with Disabilities Act tailored to meet the needs of business, government, and individuals at the local, regional, and national level. The ADA National Network consists of ten regional ADA centers in the United States providing assistance to ensure that the ADA is implemented wherever possible. The ADA National Network is not an enforcement agency, but a helpful resource supporting the ADA's mission to make it possible for everyone with a disability to live the life of freedom and equality.

CELESTIA: Welcome back to the second part of our program. Our topic today is web accessibility. We are speaking with Marsha Schwanke of the Southeast ADA Center.

Marsha, my next question for you is what are some common problems and solutions in web accessibility?

MARSHA: Well, to begin with, keep in mind that common barriers can be experienced by people in technology and environment. The common barriers can be not only in the website, but in e-mail and social media and video, or PDF and PowerPoint files.

Some common content areas that you should be aware of again across all of the different spectrums include and are not limited to images. Think about the image – is it eye candy? Or does the image give us meaningful information? If the image does give meaningful information, is there a text description known as alt-text that contains the information for the image that can be accessed when the image cannot be seen whether due to disability or technology.

Second, you want to look at the order and structure. Are there headings? And if so, are the headings used to correctly create an outline of the content.

Third, take a look at your links. Is the link recognizable as a link? Does the link make sense when it's read by itself? You want to avoid things like click here or using the link address as the link itself.

Fourth, the navigation or keyboard access. One of the easiest ways to test accessibility, unplug your mouse. Can you navigate by tabbing and key board only? Try it on different devices to see if by touch you can also access and navigate the information or even by voice.

Fifth is color. Is the information conveyed by more than color? For example, a log-in form has required information in red, but it also has an asterisk so therefore the form could be completed if the user is unable to see the color red.

Sixth, you want to think about contrast. Is there a sufficient difference between the background color and the text, the background color and links? The background color and navigation? And there are lots of different tools available to easily test if there's sufficient contrast or difference.

Seventh is audio and video. Whenever audio and video are present, is there a transcript? Is it captioned for individuals who cannot see or hear the audio or video content.

Lastly, eight, think about the writing. You want to use plain language and people first language. Also check the readability level. Again, there's a variety of tools that are available for that.

CELESTIA: Marsha, you covered a lot of areas that need to be examined and there seem to be many aspects regarding web accessibility that need to be reviewed. This could be overwhelming. What can I do to get started on checking to see if my website is accessible?

MARSHA: Well, simple checks for web accessibility can be carried out by anyone, not just developers. Regardless of technical skills and knowledge. Again, unplug that mouse and tab through. View the content in different screen sizes, and on different devices. Adjust the size of the browser window. Adjust the font size, even, in the browser window.

There's also various tools available to use for free or a fee, to check for web accessibility. Most of these tools provide a summary of errors and alerts for issues that will or may present difficulty or block use by a person with a disability. There are also checklists. You can even get information and tools based on what your role is in web accessibility.

Again, it can be carried out by anyone regardless of technical skills and knowledge. It should be incorporated from the start and throughout the development process. Again, checking is not just when limited to a one-time check box, but it's a continual process.

It is important to evaluate the accessibility for the content with voice recognition and text to speech technology. Such as for Mac, there is Voice-Over. For Windows, there's Narrator. And you can download for free Non-Visual Desk top Access known for short as NVDA.

The other thing to keep in mind is while tools are a good start, they can't do everything, and they aren't perfect. We also always need to have human judgment, manual review, and user feedback.

CELESTIA: Marsha, you've covered some of the on-line tools and some of the manual reviews to test the accessibility of a website. Are there any other best practices in creating an accessible website?

MARSHA: One of the other best practices is, especially to have an accessibility statement. Often this is located in the footer of the website or web application. And it is a link named "accessibility." This link goes to a webpage. And it contains accessibility and content information.

Also, several reasons why you would want to have this accessibility statement, it shows your commitment and awareness to accessibility. It shows your commitment and care for the users. And it also provides them, you know, with a way to contact if they encounter any issues.

For more information on developing the accessibility statement and organizational policies on web accessibility, as well as a free tool to generate an accessibility statement, visit the website for the W3C WAI.

CELESTIA: This has been a fantastic conversation. And you have mentioned so many thoughtful guidelines and practices regarding web accessibility. In closing, is there anything else, resources you would like to share about web accessibility with our audience?

MARSHA: Thank you, it's been great sharing "Web Accessibility in a Nutshell." We can't possibly cover everything and answer all of your questions on web accessibility. But check out the resource sheet on ADA Live! for links to get you started on web accessibility tools, best practices, and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

You can also check out episode 12 on ADAlive.org for more information and an introduction to web accessibility.

In addition, for questions on the ADA and web access, contact your regional ADA center in the ADA National Network at 1-800-949-4232.

Furthermore, for more information on the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) accessibility strategies and developing accessibility policies, visit the website for the W3C WAI.

In closing, keep in mind, web accessibility provides equal opportunity for everyone to get more information, learn, work, and communicate. Accessibility and usability go hand in hand. Think outside of the box. Innovate beyond cookie cutter recipes – technology and content are always changing.

Accessibility is not a one-time check box. Because at the end of the day, it comes down to a real person who needs access.

CELESTIA: Thank you so much, Marsha. It's been a pleasure. Listeners, our guest for this episode of ADA Live! has been Marsha Schwanke of the

Southeast ADA Center, a project of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and one of ten regional ADA centers in the ADA National Network.

Listening audience, as always, we thank you for joining us for this episode of ADA Live! featuring "Web Accessibility in a Nutshell." This episode and all previous ADA Live! episodes are available on our website at ADAlive.org.

All of our episodes are archived in a variety of formats, including streamed audio and accessible transcripts. You can also download the podcasts. It's as easy as going to the podcast icon on the mobile device and searching for ADA Live!

If you have any questions on the Americans with Disabilities Act, you can submit your questions any time on-line at ADAlive.org or contact your regional ADA center at 1-800-949-4232. And, remember, all calls are free and are confidential.

ADA Live! is a program of the Southeast ADA Center. Our producer is Celestia Ohrazda, with Beth Harrison, Mary Morder, Emily Rueber, Marsha Schwanke, and Barry Whaley. Our music is from 4 Wheel City, the Movement for Improvement. We'll see you next episode.

[Music]

Transcript ADA Live! Episode 65: Web Accessibility in a Nutshell

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Disclaimer: The contents of this publication are developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant #90DP0090-01-00). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this publication do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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