WeCo

GAAD: Panel Discussion Education
Thursday, May 16, 2019

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I'd like to welcome everybody to GAAD. I don't have a mic. This is going to be pretty [Inaudible.] Welcome to our new space here. My name is Lynn Wehrman. I'm the president of WeCo Accessibility Services. We've been doing these events for our fourth year. Some of you may have gone to some of the events [Inaudible]

It's pretty fun. We're also live streaming.

And live captioning. We'd like to thank CaptionAccess. They do all of our internal captioning for trainers and everything. It's great to have them on board.

We're glad that you took the time on this gorgeous evening to be with us for a little while. WeCo is a mission-based for-profit company started by myself and some other digital accessibility professionals.

It stems from work I did with the Minnesota Department of Transportation. I grew up with a disability in a family of generations of people who live with cognitive disabilities. I worked in the government on their [Inaudible] plan. I saw the power of how effective people living with disabilities could be if they were brought to the table talking about their own accessibility. It's where the concept of the company came from, from people that I met from working [Inaudible]

How we work is that, currently, all of WeCo's accessibility specialists have one or more disability. In order to test the usability testing, you have to be living with a disability. [Inaudible] throughout the job.

We really believe that that is the service that we bring to organizations, the ability to put together that team. It is incredibly hard for even big organizations to do that on their own. That's just a little bit about us.

GAAD is an international effort that was actually signed by a handful of people. It started by just a few people who thought it was important to draw attention to address the disability needs of [Inaudible.] It's really caught on worldwide. We're listed on a big international website with different events. Realize that you're celebrating with people all over the world. We really believe that this is important and we want to support it.

This year, I thought it would be really important to highlight some of the amazing people we have here in the Twin City area that have been working on digital accessibility.

If you come to the accessibility Twin Cities Meet Up that we started, a lot of these folks I meet every other month. It's really exciting to see how that Meet Up that started two years ago -- the knowledge, growth, and wealth of information that's becoming amassed in about 300 members of that Meet Up in those two years.

Some of the people that I've met are people that WeCo works with currently.

Tonight, we're going to showcase a couple of organizations and what they're doing. What I think is fun about this is somebody from the nonprofit and public sector -- for those who work on accessibility, you know that those efforts can be different depending on the type of agency that you're in.

So, it's going to be fun to be able to pick the brains of these two individuals regarding how they got going, their challenges, etc.

I'm going to introduce the panel. First of all, we have [Inaudible] County Library. She's the acting librarian for [Inaudible] Citizens for the Library. She's been at the library for almost 20 years, performing services like librarian, branch manager, etc. One of her areas of focus for the website has been testing in [Inaudible]

She has a master's in library science from the University of Iowa. She's an actress. She'll be in a play June 14th at [Inaudible.]

[Laughter]

The [Inaudible] is Teresa West. I'm not sure what the ATTOS [Inaudible.]

Teresa: It's our technical [Inaudible] services. It's really the IT department. [Inaudible.]

[Audio unclear]

Lynn: She has worked in periods of product development, management of [Inaudible] in the tech sanctuary [Audio fading in and out]

A funny thing about her is that she loves to travel. She's lived overseas for several years. She's getting better at [Inaudible] so we're going to her house afterwards.

I thought that, for starters, I would let each of you introduce yourselves. Amy, do you want to start?

Amy: You can probably tell from my introduction; my experience and background is in [Inaudible.] I started off at [Inaudible.]

[Background noise; speaker inaudible]

I started working as an online services librarian about 8 years ago. Even when I started in our department, we were very concerned with accessibility, working with accessibility. At that time, we were thinking about alternative content, language, and our developers were also thinking about the coding side of things.

For us, it's really been kind of a long journey, something that's ongoing, something that continues to be ongoing once we got better and better at it.

I started in web and online services. [Inaudible.] We were just starting to focus on usability testing. Amy [Inaudible] was working with us at the time on that. She was instrumental in helping us get that [Inaudible] more infrequently.

It's a combination of the world in general becoming more aware about digital accessibility as a legal requirement, as a service requirement, and us having staff that's coming in. Our primary website developer wasn't able to make it today, Stephanie. She came to us about three years ago. She got involved in the accessibility [Inaudible.] That will be critical to take things to the next level.

Then we started working with WeCo officially last year. It's kind of a time when everything came together. We were really ready to make our efforts more focused. We talked about working with living with disabilities and getting usability testing feedback from them.

Lynn: Teresa?

Teresa: I work in IT, but I'm not a developer. I did manage a group of business analysts who worked on requirements. I worked on the USBank.com website.

I first had a manager who asked me to work on a special project, which was to find defects of the project. I got really [Inaudible.] I took the learnings from that and brought up [Inaudible.] USBAnk.com.

At the time, we were moving to a new publishing platform and rebranding. This was 3 or 4 years ago. That was the gateway to our accessibility.

You can imagine a big organization. I'm sure some of you are from big organizations.

There's not a lot of stuff on the websites. There are thousands of pages. To tackle it, we had a new platform and new branding effort. That is when we made that transition to make everything going on to that platform accessible.

It was new to our developers, user experience folks, designers, testers, etc. The business line engaged a third party that helped and trained us and guided us. Each phase continues to transition everything over to being accessible. That's just one project of many. I think we have online banking services, online applications, and you can imagine the digital assets that a bank might have.

We have different pockets that are much more advanced than others in terms of accessibility. In my new role that I took on last year, I put together a [Inaudible] to help our IT folks become more fluent or competent in accessibility.

So, I [Inaudible] training and automated tools for accessible and tools of that nature to [audio cut out] to work in concert to deliver accessible digital access.

Lynn: There are some real differences in organizations.

I'll start with you. Can you pinpoint any unique challenges for circumstances that made pursuing accessibility easier or harder.

Amy: I don't know if this makes us unique. We're a government entity. We're part of the government umbrella. That makes us unique. It's mostly an asset because [Inaudible] County, as a whole, is also committed to accessibility. Again, we have a legal responsibility to ensure that content is accessible. Also, a service mission level inspiration.

One thing that first comes to mind about what makes accessibility challenging for us -- perhaps everyone feels this is true for their website -- we have rather complex services and information that we're trying to provide, which could be challenging to explain. I'll try not to get too deep. [Inaudible]

Our borrowing policies, our interlibrary loans. Doing that can make the language really challenging.

Another challenge that comes to mind is that we work with a lot of different vendors to provide our services. [Inaudible] is probably the biggest one that comes to mind.

We certainly put a priority on working with vendors by making accessible service. That [Inaudible.]

Teresa: One thing that's challenging for a large organization is because it's so large. I started out by doing inventory assessment of the different digital assets we had, things that were already in production maybe years ago that weren't accessible. That gave us a baseline.

In looking at that, it's quite a huge endeavor. We're breaking it down into pieces to make it more manageable. We have been doing accessibility for a few years. We're looking for those opportunities where, maybe when you're switching to the new platform, that that is your big pivotal point to start ensuring that everything's accessible. It's easier than trying to [Inaudible.]

Nonetheless, we have efforts going throughout the organization about accessibility.

One of the unique things that has recently happened is [Inaudible.] They also have accessibility specialists, maybe screen readers, as part of our user experience. [Inaudible] for ensure that delivering accessibility in our designs by frames or concepts [Inaudible.]

We work [Inaudible.]

A lot of the changes in dev ops [Inaudible.]

So, we need to make sure that everybody is going to be working in tandem and are well-trained to keep that training going and [Inaudible.]

Those are some unique challenges I see.

Lynn: It sounds like both organizations took planning to get here. Is that true?

Both: Yes.

Lynn: OK. Just wondering, in that planning process, were there some startling gaps that surprised you? As you got into it, what was the thing that you didn't expect, that you had to play catch-up on, or . . . ?

WeCo sees organizations that -- we talked about this in public relations -- there's kind of this belief that IT departments know it all and that we shouldn't have to train our staff. Our sales staff is friendly with most of the [Inaudible.] The client asks us to try [Inaudible.] We often say there's training one way or the other. We can [Inaudible] consulting hours and ask a bunch of questions. That's one thing that we find [Inaudible.]

It's pretty common for big companies to assume that the IT departments know it all.

Teresa: Do we have any developers in the group?

Developers try to discover on their own. They really take initiative to go out and learn.

I'm a huge proponent of training because it's essential for knowing and understanding [Inaudible.] I hear what you're saying, and I think that might be true to a certain degree, but our company is big on training.

Lynn: I'm wondering, along that line, is there anything throughout this process that you found out there's a gap that they needed to meet that the organization wasn't prepared to meet?

Amy: I don't know if it's that so much, but going back to something we said earlier, that there may be that expectation that accessibility and the website [Inaudible.] It's really ongoing. It's not like a one-time -- you just make it accessible and it's done. You all know. You're [Inaudible.] It's always changing. Everyone's learning.

Everyone has been really supportive, but it can be a little challenging to communicate that it's ongoing. There are things that many of us aren't aware of. We aren't familiar with screen readers or other assistive technology.

When you look at a website, we're just not aware of so many things and maybe don't realize the work that's happening is very important, but it may not result in an evident difference to [Inaudible] people.

Lynn: That's interesting.

Teresa: I agree with what you just said. It's not a one and done. It changes almost every day. You need to keep on the forefront to keep it accessible. That is sometimes a challenge, depending on the product and who you might have offering the pages. Is there a different marketing group, commercial government group, or something? You have to remember that they have to be trained on accessibility, as well. When you offer those pages, it needs to have the right labels and content.

Amy: For me, a challenge in my role is communication and to make sure that I'm communicating clearly with people so that they can understand what we're trying to accomplish, why we're doing the things we do, etc. It can be challenging when I have a developer with [Inaudible] tech skills. Sometimes it's a positive. I'm communicating with staff who also don't have that same technical background. So, there's lots of opportunities to increase my communication skills and effectively working with colleagues.

I think you asked what strengths our organization has. People like my colleagues and the administration are very receptive to accessibility. It's just helping people understand what we're doing and why.

Lynn: What I'm hearing is that both organizations are committed to accessibility and that it's something that you recognize is ongoing.

So, how do you handle things like staff turnover? How do you keep that legacy alive and keep it -- I think that's [Inaudible.] How do you grow that culture of accessibility?

Amy: That is a great question.

[Laughter]

I'm thinking back to when I started in online services. There was already a commitment to accessibility. As a new staff person in that area, I was really encouraged to do self-learning, attend workshops, and a wide range of things.

Now I'm thinking of my role as manager. That's a good question to ask. That's a good goal for me to [Inaudible.] Yes, keep encouraging that.

We also have in accessibility strategy guideline for the website, which is very helpful. It really lays down our principles about what we're trying to do and how to accomplish it. I think that strategy's going to be very helpful.

Teresa: A couple of things that we're doing -- communication is a big challenge in any organization. We started conducting what we call quarterly road shows where I'll go. My partners and user experience with accessibility and the accessibility office who [Inaudible] the policies -- we go, for example, to a city

with a big contingency of people and conduct these educational seminars. Then we explain what we're doing and why it's so important. We talk about how it should work in a project, that history.

We have also started a sector, a community in practice, from all different parts of our enterprise. There are a lot of different IT departments with different user experiences and different departments.

We had our first [Inaudible] last month in community practice. We established a SharePoint site where we shared our proposed information. We're talking about how to standardize across the enterprise with requirements and different tools and training, so we're all learning and hearing the same language.

Those are a couple of things that [voice trailing off]

Lynn: That sounds really ambitious and admirable.

I know that we're coming toward south end of the panel. I do want to give some time for the audience to ask questions. I have one that I was dying to ask tonight that I know we grapple with as an accessibility company.

Has your organization found any return on investment yet on accessibility? If so, how do you track that?

Student: Maybe I'll jump in.

In the nonprofit world, I think that has a slightly different flavor for us. We're always really interested in the impact that we're having and how we measure that, but it gets a little different than the for-profit world.

One thing we know is that when we make our services, our website, more accessible, we're really making it better for all of our users. Getting back to my earlier comments about the complexity of the services and information we're trying to provide, the easier we can make that for any user to use and understand, the more impact we're having. We're really [Inaudible] our roles then. It's something we're committed to. It's something that the company's committed to.

I was just at a great meeting yesterday talking about language and how that benefits everyone. [Inaudible]

Lynn: Yeah, absolutely. It definitely is harder for an organization that's public driven than government. The audience is going to look different.

Did I put you on the spot?

[Laughter]

Teresa: I heard it say that the ROI model -- I think a lot can be used in technology.   The ROI is when you do it right the first time and catch those things upstream instead of downstream [Inaudible.] Heaven forbid. There's that ROI.

What I see with the people I work with in accessibility throughout my company is that people take a lot of pride in making sure that our websites for online banking, all the stuff that's out there, is accessible for everyone so that people can read the same content, perform the same functions, everybody regardless.

To me, that goal was really [Inaudible.]

Lynn: It's really gratifying to do that. When I started the company 8 years ago, we were pitching to our first companies, it was, "We can't justify that cost" always. Both of you said how do you measure a cost that just includes everybody? Thank you. It's wonderful that you did that.

I think we're going to open up the floor for a few minutes. Is there anything that you're dying to ask the panelists?

Go ahead. We're going to have to ask everybody to project. We have no microphone.

Participant: Do you have any insight about the accessibility of educational content and [Inaudible] the aspect to interactive [Inaudible]

Lynn: The question was if you have any experience with making educational content accessible?

Amy: Yeah. I think it does go back to the larger question of making sure that we're having a conversation with vendors about the importance of accessibility.

I don't know if this is what you're asking, but we make sure that we provide content that is at a wide range of [Inaudible] levels, thinking specifically about some of our online resources. We have things that are for -- they're aimed at younger students or reading levels and it goes up to fifth grade. But, that can be very valuable for adults, too. We try to present it in a way where we [Inaudible] easy to find out. We also don't present the resources like, "This is very juvenile and childish," which I think is helpful because many adults need or want content that's at that more accessible reading level.

Lynn: I might be able to answer this a little better. We've been working with a number of vendors who produce classroom material. More recently, we've been testing with the textbook education association. We've been filling out TBA reports. We just finished up a manual accessibility audit for an online learning program software, which we have done through the years. Now [Inaudible] meeting educational requirements.

The most interesting one that we got to do was a learning [Inaudible] for a grade school. Sue Ann and I were sharing an office at that point. We were doing little learning songs and had to figure out how to make it accessible.

For us, vendors come to us and say, "We know we have to do a TA [sp?] report. We have no idea how to translate that to a learning [Inaudible.]" Our accessibility team researches it and figures it out. In that instance, it really wasn't that hard. All we thought of was how to make it accessible. We need to come up with lyrics so someone can access lyrics. Lyrics had to be in a digitally accessible format. We have specialists who do that. The vendor was really happy because they didn't have a clue. It was new to us, as Sue Ann Rodriguez says, "if it's digital, we can figure it out. We can analyze it." That stuff is actually kind of fun for us.

[Laughter]

Feel free to talk to me or Sue Ann if you have questions.

Any other questions?

Participant: What was the number one thing [Inaudible]

Lynn: Number one theme point or obstacle to achieving accessibility?

Teresa: In a large organization, competing priorities is a big deal. Something that comes out is shiny and hew. You gotta have it. It drives this kind of revenue. Those are the challenges. I'd recommend that your accessibility program be right at the C suite level, so you don't have to worry about competing with those other priorities because you're right up there with security, performance, features, etc.

I'm going to say we're learning that lesson.

[Laughter]

Amy: I'll go back to the comments I made before about effectively communicating with people why we need to do or not to something. I think everyone has the best of intentions. They want something on the website or part of the website that doesn't meet accessibility guidelines, standards, etc. Helping them understand that so it doesn't seem strange or contrary of a decision I or someone made.

Lynn: Question over here?

Participant: You talk about the importance of communication. [Inaudible] how do you sell that?

Lynn: How do you sell the importance of accessibility training?

Amy: Of accessibility training? We have a pretty strong organizational commitment to training, so we're lucky that it really fits into that, at least for people who are working directly with the website, either website content or development.

I guess it might be a little more challenging if you [Inaudible] about how to train or communicate with people throughout the organization who maybe aren't contributing content or directly working on the website. I don't know if you're thinking about training [Inaudible], but for our group of people who work directly on the website, we're lucky that it's a priority for our organization and for the county.

We also have really good partnerships with people who work on the [Inaudible] website, accessibility for [Inaudible.]

I'll mention one quick thing about that. It's helpful for us to tie digital accessibility and website accessibility into our larger priorities for inclusion and reduced disparities, diversity and inclusion. So, helping people make those ties just creates even more buy-in, more excitement about it.

Teresa: [Background noise; speaker inaudible]

He wants people who can't get funding for the training or they don't want to take the training?

Speaker: [Away from mic]

Teresa: Sure. Yeah. That's a common thing. You're not training everybody in the group, especially like a PM or [Inaudible] master because they're supposed to keep the project on task and keep moving forward.

One of the things that we have is a policy. The bank says this is our policy. We do the right thing. That helps.

The second thing is we have a user accessibility group. They work with the user experience group. They help emphasize why it's so important and what the alternatives are.

Often, making it accessible is better than where we might have started in a design or layout or whatever.

Once people get used to working in a partnership like that, it goes a long way. We've seen that in our organization. People get involved in projects up front like with screen readers.

I emphasize to do it up front with design because that's where a lot of requirements come from. For accessibility, content, layout, page structure, labels, etc. I could go on and on. You know that.

If you start up there and you're using Agile, we have a design preview. We talk through it, so the whole team hears about it, including the PM or [Inaudible] master. That helps.

Training should be mandatory as part of -- if you're designing front end user interfaces, training should be right up there if possible.

Lynn: I can probably wrap what we've seen around that in that we've learned that people get on board with accessibility when they experience living with disabilities. It starts to hit home. That's part of the reason that, as a group of professionals who do digital who live with disabilities, we always [Inaudible.] We know if you can invite your boss to this thing, drag him to this thing after work, they can see not a developer who's figured out how to [Inaudible], but a woman with a master's degree who uses it in her job every day, it's a different thing. Sometimes that process can be really slow. I think that the more that people give that exposure, the more they start to understand that they don't want to leave people out. They start to get to where they understand that that's a real person. I think that makes a big difference.

We'll take one more question.

Participant: You talked about the legacy aspects that you mentioned. [Inaudible]

Teresa: That's a tough nut to crack, I have to admit. We've made some progress on stand-along PDFS, PDFs that have static information where they're not dynamically [Inaudible] with other sources. We have it set up to engage with different vendors to report to it themselves.

Participant: You outsource some of it?

Teresa: Yes. The business line can absolutely go to a third party and have that remediate or convert that PDF for them.

Where we run into challenges is when we have statements that have dynamic data that are fed from a credit card. You get your credit card statement with transactions. I've done a lot of research on that. There aren't intuitive solutions yet. That was a couple years ago. We continue to look at that. That's where we're going to go in the future.

We do offer braille and large print statements. Email is an alternative.

Lynn: I wish we could spend longer on that, but we have a [Inaudible] panel. A number of you are here to see the demonstrations.

One of the fun things that you get to see tonight is usually stuff like Sue Ann [Inaudible.] We have a conference room B over there. Dane is doing iPhone voiceover. He's got it projected up on the screen tonight.

We have Chad doing Dragon Naturally Speaking. We apologize we didn't get a screen up for him. You'll have to look over his shoulder.

Who am I missing? This is awesome. [Inaudible] is in conference room C across the hall. Some of you have seen it. You can type your name in braille. She has a new one. It's connected to a screen.

If you've never come to demonstrations before, don't be shy. Walk in. Start talking. Look over their shoulder. They'll look at your website for you if you want.

Please feel free to help yourself to food. There's beer and bottled water in the fridge.

The rest of the evening is up to you. You just get to mix and mingle with our testers.

Before we conclude, I want to say thank you to our wonderful operations team that does our set-up and to our public relations team that checks people in and greets people.

This is the first year that WeCo has had an official [Inaudible] coordinator, Andy. Andy has done a wonderful job. He's made it a lot easier for us.

Thank you so much for coming. We're going to be here for the next hour, hour and a half. Take your time. Get some demonstrations.

Our photographer, [Inaudible.] The volunteer flew in from Philadelphia to help her out.

Thank you for coming out tonight. Thank you to our wonderful panel.

[Applause]