

Jadene Aderonmu 0:00

Hello, and welcome to the Methods podcast. My name is Jadene Aderonmu. Today, I am joined by members of Methods Digital team, and we have with us Tom Ridd - Lead Developer, Andy Lancaster - User Researcher, Josie Sawers - Content Designer, and Harry Bailey - User Experience Designer. In today's episode, we will be discussing accessibility. In particular, how organisations can prioritise accessibility. This episode was recorded on the 27th of April 2021.

Welcome, everyone. Thank you for agreeing to be part of this discussion. Today, we are going to be exploring the topic of accessibility, in particular, how organisations can prioritise accessibility. Now, web accessibility, just to give a bit of context is the process of making digital products that could be websites, apps, or tools accessible to everyone. It is about creating access to the same information for all users, regardless of the disability they may have. And to me, this topic is very important, and I am looking forward to discussing it with you. And in terms of approaching accessibility, it is sometimes hard to know where to start. Andy, when would you say we should look? Or when should accessibility be considered in the design process?

Andy Lancaster 1:28

Well thinking from a research perspective, I think it should be considered at the very early stage. So, when you are planning, I think you have to do that to kind of make sure your project is delivered effectively and ensure that the process is accepted as accessible as possible. So, in planning research, things I would consider things like, how would the research be conducted. But at the moment, that's primarily online, but if it's being conducted in a face-to-face setting, is it being conducted in an accessible venue, I think about things like recruiting, and how that could have an impact on accessibility, having a think about the software that will be used in a testing session, or prototypes that are being tested, are they going to be accessible to the participant taking part. Also considering reasonable adjustments, and offering those to the participant, if it is relevant. As well as thinking about that at the very beginning, I also think it is kind of it is important to continue to think about that as the project develops and moves through different phases. And keep re-evaluating, and to make sure that the steps you put in place at the beginning, continue to be relevant. And if they need any tweaks kind of going forward throughout the project.

Jadene Aderonmu 2:43

Absolutely. And I think if we do not consider it at the beginning, just with you talking about all the different considerations that we need to take on board, it could certainly cause issues further down the line. With it being something considered at the beginning, and Andy, you touched on user research, I am wondering how Harry if you could maybe tell us who do you think should be responsible for accessibility within an organization?

Harry Bailey 3:11

I think everyone has got a different part to play and being responsible for delivering an accessible product. Ultimately, I think it's kind of with the product owner to decide whether the product, is at a standard that they're happy to release, but I think as a designer, I can design something that when I hand it off to a developer, it makes their life easier to implement accessible features, which in turn

makes the PO's life easier, because it kind of removes the question marks about whether it meets a standard or not. Because, yeah, as Andy said, it has been considered from the beginning. And it has gone through research through design through development. And then you are not really left in a position where you are wondering about whether or not it's accessible, because you've kind of done all of that hard work already.

Jadene Aderonmu 4:02

Definitely. And while you were speaking, I could see Tom nodding along for those who cannot see because we are on a podcast. Do you have anything to add to that one?

Unknown Speaker 4:14

I think there is a very close relationship between developers and designers that must be made even closer when talking about accessibility because the decisions that are made at design time have a very big impact on how much development is going to have to be done down the line. And as Harry said, these are product decisions which interact on multiple levels. So, at the point where you are deciding whether to use a set of radio buttons versus an automatically filling in list, it needs to be acknowledged by the product manager that if you go for the automatically filling in list, there is going to be a lot of work that needs to be done by the developers to make that an accessible product. So, it is the conversation to be had between designers and developers that can be the necessity for the more advanced development can be settled at that point.

Jadene Aderonmu 5:26

Absolutely, I really liked how you touched on decisions that must be made at multiple levels, because it is not something that is considered in isolation. It is very much interconnected throughout the whole company, which is why I think it is so important that we have got such a broad spectrum of people in this discussion to talk about accessibility, because we all have different involvements with it, and it's very important that we advocate for it. Josie, what would you say, are the benefits of improving accessibility?

Josie Sawers 5:58

I think there is a little bit of a misunderstanding about accessibility, and it is purely about disability. While disability does affect probably a bigger proportion of people who expect I think it is about one in five people in the UK, accessibility is more about all of us. So, for something to be accessible, the person using it needs to be able to complete the task they are trying to achieve without encountering a barrier or an issue. So, if we think about accessibility in these terms, you can quickly see how whether something is accessible or not is something that is clearly going to affect us all at some stage or another. So, accessibility might not just be related to a specific disability, it might be something situational, so maybe tiredness, or if you are unable to use sound or something, you might want some subtitles to be able to view stuff on the quiet carriage in the train. So really, the benefits of accessibility quite wide ranging in that respect. But if we kind of want a clearer list of what those might be, it could be just as simple as avoiding discrimination and any legal challenges.

You can reach a wider audience if your content and your web applications are accessible. It builds positive PR. It improves search engine optimisation and bounce rates, increases usability. So yes, you can see there is quite a lot of benefits there.

Jadene Aderonmu 7:38

Absolutely. I feel like what really stood out in what you were saying is that accessibility is for all of us could make a banner with just that that is a big take home. So, we've talked about the benefits of improving accessibility, how can organisations better implement accessibility, I'll pass this over to you, Tom,

Tom Ridd 8:01

There is sort of two levels at which accessibility is being handled at the moment. And there are the ongoing projects, which we talked about, and how people can, how design can better implement accessibility. But then there's also the Big Bang projects, which are happening, the let's fix a 25-year legacy of the internet going on and not being inclusive, and for people who might potentially use it. And those projects, we are doing a couple, we're doing a couple of moments in various government departments. And they are very hard. It's very hard to retrofit accessibility from a development point of view onto a website, which isn't accessible. Moving towards a model where accessibility is included at every stage and in every feature of a project, where your definition of done for a sprint for a feature in a sprint includes it being accessible, is going to be one of the bigger leaps towards handling accessibility in a better way.

Jadene Aderonmu 9:20

Absolutely. Would you say that you faced any issues with working with collaborators, individuals, perhaps even stakeholders on accessibility?

Tom Ridd 9:33

I think in government, there is a great willingness to think about accessibility at the moment, not merely because it is now legally required, and has been for a couple of years to make websites accessible, but also there's a there's a great willingness across the spectrum of stakeholders to engage and say, Okay, we've got to make our products better for everyone.

People are finally talking and thinking about it, but have not quite engaged with the cost, and not just cost in terms of money, though you generally need to get more developers on a project, but cost in terms of, you might need to do simpler designs, you might have to change what you're providing. It might take, because accessibility is very hard, there is a very big trade up in the experience that developers actually need to properly implement a feature that, you know, can be properly read by a screen reader, that can be read at all levels of zoom, so that you can change the text in this text size, and it still looks fine. So that if you look at the underlying structure, it still looks fine. So you need a level of experience on that project, at least level of oversight on that project that isn't usually there.

We're at a time when accessibility experts realize that and people who are delivering accessibility focused on that, but the wider structures of government which, for example, the procurement structures have not taken into account those, they are asking for this increase in quality of everything that they build, that it's now mandatory to increase the quality of every piece of software build, but there's no change in the amount of time for projects, there's no time and the amount of cost of projects, particularly after COVID, the amount that governments willing to pay for project is decreasing, and something has got to give. And it's probably going to have to be the scope of what is actually achieved, you've got to push up the quality of everything you do but push down the scope. It's up to all of us to work out how to deliver how to what features we can actually deliver in a project. So those conversations between developers and designers need to happen to work out how to deliver an accessible product quickly and efficiently.

Jadene Aderonmu 12:45

Definitely. Harry, do you have something you would like to add to that?

Harry Bailey 12:49

Yeah, it was something you mentioned about kind of the level of experience required by a developer to implement some of these things. And I was just curious, where is that experience picked up? Is it part of kind of core curriculums at universities? Or is it self-led? Or is it that you happen to be on the right team at the right time, and you learn from somebody?

Unknown Speaker 13:11

Formal learning for developers to do professional standard work, if you look at Computer Science degrees, they do not really cover accessibility, they are more concerned with algorithms, networks and things of that level. If you look at people who have come through code schools, code schools are great, but they are teaching the basics and teaching someone who does not know how to code to code and become a professional developer.

I do not know anywhere where it where accessibility is actually taught as standard. It needs to be on quite a deep level of front-end development and you can study front end development, but more often you're learning in the field. The problem is that a lot of people in my business have taught themselves to code and they've taught themselves how to build projects and accessible features and the quality of accessible features if you are not impaired in some fashion is invisible. You have to go the extra mile to provide a level of development which takes say 50% longer and/or people who have just been coding for fun and don't have an impairment do not have the impetus to do that, they'll be wanting to move on to the next thing. So yeah, that is a problem, you need to learn from experience and from other developers. And from getting engaged in programs and education within your professional workplace. We are quite lucky working in government that there are a lot of the people we work for, they have got those accessibility communities within government, within their departments. But yes, there is very little formal education.

Jadene Aderonmu 15:45

Definitely something that that needs to change. Moving over to user research, just keeping with the same question, Andy, have you found that you faced any issues or challenges working with stakeholders on accessibility? And I am particularly interested in your previous history to Methods because that would have brought a breadth of different experiences that you would have faced?

Andy Lancaster 16:11

Yeah, so immediately, prior to working in Methods, I was working at the disability equality charities scope. So, kind of in that regard, the kind of stakeholders within that organisation were very much bought into accessibility. So, I was quite lucky in that regard, there was definitely a priority from an organisational point of view, which fed down into conducting research, development of web platforms already fed through the whole organization.

Jadene Aderonmu 16:43

That is excellent. And I guess, working with those stakeholders who value accessibility is something that you can carry forward into new projects to have the same kind of advocacy of doing what is right and beneficial for all users.

Andy Lancaster 17:02

Yes, definitely.

Jadene Aderonmu 17:04

Josie, I am kind of asking you a dual question here. I would also like to ask you the same question to find out what issues you have faced, but also, what challenges have arisen in making content accessible?

Josie Sawers 17:22

So yeah, I think Tom touched on this for it really is it's not factored into any of the projects. Usually, in terms of having its own kind of dedicated time, it is making something accessible, as expected to, you are expected to do that, along with anything that you're doing. And in reality, I think it is really hard to have, as with anything, it's hard to do two things at once. So, you do your work, and you create the thing, and then more often than not accessibility is something that you think about at the end, if you have time. So, I think that for me is kind of the general challenge to organisations is that in order to really think about accessibility from the beginning, and then get all the benefits from having something that is that is accessible, is something that needs to be given its kind of own dedicated time and attention and pot of money if you like. So that for me, those would be the main challenges. So, the second question was around the content challenges, I think it was Jadene was it? So, for something to be accessible, there's kind of four principles that the web content accessibility group, I think I have got that right, WCAG, I normally call it by the acronym. The four principles that they have based their stuff on is that something needs to be perceivable. So, it needs to be in a

format that can be read or repurposed by device so like a screen reader or Braille device. So that might be something as simple as if you are writing, say, an annual report for an organisation and there are some charts in the report, which is great when it is a picture and you can see that picture. But if somebody is listening to the report, you have got a shareholder who uses assistive technology, when they get to that image of the chart, the report is just blank for them. They do not have that information. It needs to be operable, which means for example, normally you would go onto a website and you might use a mouse to navigate it. Could you also use a key keyboard to navigate it if you have problems in using a mouse? It needs to be understandable, so usually that means written in plain English. Or if you have a particular audience in mind written with their needs in mind. And it needs to be robust, so you know, whatever technology I choose to access that information in, which could be anything, right, it could be a different browser, so can I view it in Chrome? Can I view it in Firefox? Can I view it in IE, if anyone is using that anymore?! Or can I use it using my screen reading device. So, you've got perceivable, operable, understandable and robust. So those are the four main challenges. But more specifically, you have got things like the contrast of the text, low contrast, you have got colour blindness issues, people perceive colour in vastly different ways. Missing text on images kind of touched on that earlier, ambiguous link text, so using colour to signify information, using tables for laying out of the page, rather than using tables for data, if you do use tables for data are your headings marked up correctly so that people can navigate them using other means. So, there is lots of challenges in that way. I think, forms in particular can be especially tricky. So especially think about the last year and a bit where everything has moved online. We are all interacting more online, because we cannot go and stand in the post office quite as well, or we cannot go stand in the bank quite as well talk to somebody face to face. So, these forms that have been developed, they need to act almost like a person who is guiding us through that process of filling in a form. So those are just kind of some of the particular content challenges that there are.

Jadene Aderonmu 22:07

That is excellent. I really liked your point as forms as a guide. Andy did you have something you wanted to add to that?

Andy Lancaster 22:14

I mentioned my previous work experience already. One of my main responsibilities when I was working at Scope was testing their online content. So, the charity Maintain, I guess, similar to maybe an organisation like Citizens Advice, quite a large body of online information, and I would test that with participants before it was put live on the website, and kind of Josie kind of covered off a lot of other things that you would test that with participants, and kind of how it was formatted that is accessible for different users. A couple of things that came up frequently, when we were testing in terms of accessibility, quite a lot of the material we are focusing on related to finances / benefits, things in that kind of area, and quite a lot of people struggled with the use of technical language and jargon and found that inaccessible. So, there are a few words or phrases that came up frequently in testing again, and again, such as 'statutory', 'means tested' came up a lot, that people just were not really that clear on what those terms meant. And, when we did more legally focused pieces, terms like 'power of attorney', were just not really accessible for quite a lot of people that didn't have a certain level of knowledge. And one other thing that came up quite regularly and when I was testing content was that certain kind of content could be quite triggering for people. So, I talked about

finances there, so potentially looking at how like a paragraph on say, reduction of benefits or in positions of fines, if that's not worded in a particular way, it could trigger anxiety for the reader. One other example that came to mind during the beginning of first lockdown, we tested a piece about bereavement and what benefits and things like that people were entitled to after bereavement, and some of the people we tested with said, "this is really useful, It's a really interesting, practical piece, but I think you need to include a warning box at the top, because if someone's reading this and they've recently lost a partner, or family member, this could be very triggering for them". I think it is about considering the emotional state people were in when they may be consuming that content as well.

Josie Sawers 24:52

I think those are fantastic points, particularly the emotional state one and that plays back to our point that accessibility is about all of us. Any of us at any time could be in that emotional state. So just because we do not not classically define ourselves as having a particular disability does not mean that accessibility will not need to apply to us one day. But also the legalese, I think that is the kind of the last frontier for accessible content is quite often the battles that you will have with the legal or the policy teams, because they are they used to talking in a certain way. They are very, very resistant to having their content changed into something that's a lot easier to understand. So, I think that that will be the last great battle that we will have on this journey, certainly.

Jadene Aderonmu 25:54

A battle I hope we will win. Harry?

Harry Bailey 25:59

Have you got any legalese, pet hates Josie stuff that just keeps coming up, and you can't, for the life of you get changed?

Josie Sawers 26:08

I do have an antidote, it is not quite legalese, but it's in a previous job I used to work for. I do not know if I can name names here, but I am going to anyway, I used to work for national grid. I think it took us about probably three or four years to get them to change what they called, they were calling this thing a transmission tower, because that is the proper thing, that is the term that the thing is, it's a transmission tower. So, whenever they talk to anybody in the news, or on their website, they were talking about transmission towers, the whole of the population, including you guys will know a transmission tower as a pylon. But National Grid refused to call them pylons for a good four or five years. So, you might be factually correct, but nobody outside the business is understanding what you are talking about because they all refer to them as they are completely different words. So yeah, not quite legalese, but that is my favourite antidote there in terms of making language more accessible.

Jadene Aderonmu 27:19

Thank you, I am surprised by just how long it took to get it approved, but I am glad it got there.

Josie Sawers 27:26

They are engineers, they are very precise. So, you know, you cannot call something that it is not. Apparently, you can, and you have to pick your battles.

Jadene Aderonmu 27:37

So, Harry, I was wondering how do you advocate for accessibility in your role?

Harry Bailey 27:45

So I think that there are a few different ways you can do it, early and often as we talked about the beginning of this, is the best way, because it is much easier to get it right the first time than it is to retro actively try and fix something that you did wrong in the past. But obviously, you always join teams that have that kind of attitude towards it kind of built in and there is a lot of going back and fixing things you have to do. It can sometimes feel unfortunately, like an obstacle that you want to be doing this new feature or open to this new user group, but the service or the product as it is, is not accessible to people that are already trying to get on. And I think in situations like those, I think Josie was absolutely right. It's, it's not about it being a checklist, and you going down and saying keyboard, screen reader, and all the rest of it. It's about saying accessibility is for everybody and framing it as a tide that lifts all boats in a service that's more accessible is more usable, regardless of whether the person on the other end has an access requirement or uses assistive technologies or is feeling a certain way. I think colour contrast is the best example and the one that stakeholders can recognise in that something that is more visible to someone with an impairment, is also more visible to someone that does not have an impairment. And good visual design helps your entire user base in that way. I think it is about trying to get away from the checkbox mentality and more towards accessibility is for everybody kind of mentality.

Jadene Aderonmu 29:33

Absolutely. And again, not anyone can see this because we are audio based but everyone is nodding in agreement with what you said Harry, so that definitely hits home. I think this is a question I can probably bring around the group, Tom, what would you like to add?

Tom Ridd 29:49

Thinking over something that Harry had said and I am afraid I cannot remember now what of his comments sparked it off, but it was something about the continual nature of accessibility and how it gets forgotten. And how in the dev world, we have a concept called tech debt. And often that is referred to 'Okay, you've been doing things badly for a long time, you've now got to fix it', which is kind of the way the accessibility works, you just keep on working, and then you work out, there's a problem, and you have to fix all this stuff. But what it is supposed to mean is that you do things properly. And when you need to go fast, you accept, we are going fast and we're going to have to fix these things later, you're taking on the technical debt, and in the same way that if we could start thinking about accessibility debt, if we do things quickly, for a purpose for a product project purpose, then we're going to have to go back and fix it later and we need to keep score of that. And we need



to accept that it is going to be more expensive to fix it later than it is going to be to fix it now. Then we're starting to look at a more managed version of accessibility, and implementing it.

Jadene Aderonmu 31:14

I do not think it's something that we can just let fall by the wayside. Just like technical debt, we have to keep on top of making those accessibility enhancements improvements to continue to deliver better services and better products. I think this is a very important question so I'm going to keep rolling with this theme and asking you Josie, how do you advocate for accessibility in your role?

Josie Sawers 31:42

I think as much as possible, you get to the end of each meeting / you get to the end of each sprint / you get to the end of everything that you do, and you just stop and have a quick check and think. What have we talked about, what have we done today, or in this last hour, where we might not have considered all of the things that we need to consider because we're so used to thinking in norms, that those things can easily get forgotten. It is just a human trait that your mental model tends to simplify everything, and you tend to focus on your own experience, or the experience of those that are close to you. And I think accessibility really is about thinking about those edge cases all the time. So just having even that 30 second check, at the end of every stage can make sure that you have not neglected anything that might be expensive to retrofit.

Jadene Aderonmu 33:02

Absolutely. Andy, how would you, or how do you advocate for accessibility in your role?

Andy Lancaster 33:11

I would really kind of second what Josie said there. So, I think it's about being constantly mindful of it. Thinking back to what I mentioned at the beginning of the podcast, so say, if I am planning out a research project, it is about thinking about accessibility, every stage that I'm planning. Also thinking further in terms of when feeding back findings, what are the implications in terms of accessibility? And when other researchers present to me or shall share findings with me, if accessibility has not been considered, or there may have things been overlooked, being comfortable to raise those and make sure that they are addressed, I think is quite important.

Jadene Aderonmu 33:58

Just to kind of build on what you said, how can inclusive user testing improve digital experiences?

Andy Lancaster 34:07

Well, I think running inclusive user testing sessions help the researcher understand how different people's digital experiences vary, and what potential barriers there may be for people using a

particular product or service. One hypothetical example, say I was testing a prototype with a participant using a screen reader, I think conducting that test would help the researcher to better understand how that participant processes information on a particular site or page and understand more about that individual's digital experience. So, you probably learn things like 'is that page formatted properly for this particular participant', 'is the correct heading structure in place' - learning more about how that participant engages. Looking further on as well, I think a user researcher can use research findings and presenting research findings to build empathy about particular user experiences with other members of their team and ensure that accessibility issues are either corrected if that is what the findings have been from the research, or if anything needs to be addressed in further iterations for product.

Tom Ridd 35:27

User research is not always directly important to my day-to-day job, but very much keeps me grounded in who and why we are building this product. For the signing off, from a technical point of view, we do not interview that many people. It is just an impossibility in qualitative research. So, taking into account through qualitative research, every single technical requirement is very difficult, but acknowledging that you need to put the time in, that's where for developers that a lot of value comes.

Harry Bailey 36:18

It is a quick one for Andy around recruiting users with accessibility requirements. I am kind of curious, I cannot imagine it is easy, especially given how valuable it is?

Andy Lancaster 36:32

Yeah, I think you are right. Again, going back to my previous job role, I was lucky enough that Scope run in in house panel. So, they managed to panel of around 3 to 400 participants who either self-identified as disabled, or a parent of disabled child. In that sense, access to participants is very easy in that particular job role. In other job roles, I think, for the most part, there can be a cost associated to it. If you are going through an external recruiter, they will tend to charge more money for accessing a particular group who identify as having a disability or impairment which is frustrating. And it is kind of one of those obstacles that potentially going back to what we are talking about of challenges with stakeholders, if stakeholders are potentially not willing to meet that cost that could be problematic in terms of conducting the research with those participants.

Jadene Aderonmu 37:43

I think we are drawing to a close. This has been a really valuable discussion. And to our listeners, I hope this has sparked ideas and conversations on how you can advocate for accessibility on a personal level, but also how organisations can prioritise accessibility. Because as we have discussed, and a running theme that has been through this podcast is that accessibility is for all of us. Thank you for listening, and we look forward to seeing you next time.

End.