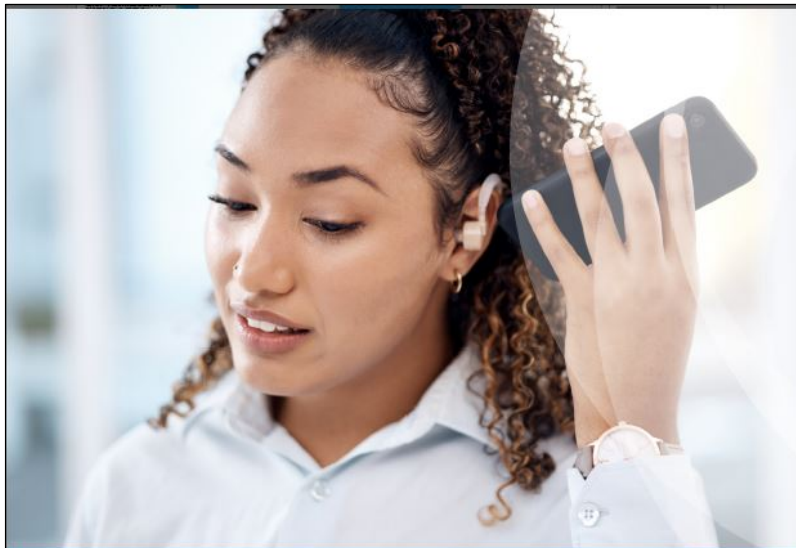




A Wake-Up Call on Digital Experience and Accessibility

Paper



A GOVERNMENT TECHNOLOGY THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PAPER | ACQUIA

A Wake-Up Call on Digital Experience and Accessibility

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Research shows agency websites have more barriers than public officials may think. **Here's how to fix them.**

To ensure digital equity for individuals with disabilities and increase overall adoption of online self-service, agencies must continually assess and improve the accessibility, findability, and mobile friendliness of their websites and services. Many common issues are easy to correct. Having the right strategies and technology tools helps.

Accessibility scorecard

More than 70% of government respondents in a recent Center for Digital Government (CDG) survey rated their websites good or excellent in terms of accessibility.¹

These results differ sharply from a 2023 Barriers to Digital Inclusion study conducted by the American Foundation for the Blind. The study found that 75% of blind, low-vision and deaf-blind respondents faced frequent or occasional barriers when accessing government benefits like Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) through agency websites. The percentage increased to 79% when respondents used a mobile app.²

The discrepancy in survey findings points toward the need for greater attention on making government websites accessible for constituents with disabilities and providing a better digital experience for everyone.

A recent study found people with disabilities often face barriers when accessing government benefits through agency websites or mobile apps.

Strategies for better accessibility and user experience

In the CDG survey, agency officials said their top technology challenges in providing high-quality digital experiences were keeping content up to date, lack of integration between systems, and complex navigation and information architecture. The following strategies help address these issues.

Make it easy to update content

Embrace these strategies to help web developers (and staff without specialized skills) create and update online content faster and easier:

- Low-code/no-code content creation so non-technical staff can deploy new sites quickly and update, edit and publish content themselves
- Modular, reusable content structure so users can update specific sections without impacting an entire webpage; changes should automatically replicate to any other area where the content exists
- Workflow automation optimization — such as predesigned templates for common content types — to accelerate development and reduce repetitive tasks

- Content approval workflows to streamline content governance and accelerate website upgrades that require approval
- Version control to ensure a single source of truth and systematically retire obsolete websites and content

Do this now: Create or adopt a web standards document for accessibility. The U.S. Department of Justice in April 2024 published a final rule under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act that requires state and local government websites and mobile apps to meet the Worldwide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA. These guidelines outline core principles and specific criteria for accessible web and mobile content.³

Modernize your technology to simplify integration

Government websites incorporate data from a multitude of sources, including email, customer relationship management solutions, analytics and payment processing services. Your content management platform needs to pull together these resources and make them accessible to all residents. The ability to integrate these systems and resources is essential for seamless and equitable user experiences, data sharing, and adoption of artificial intelligence and other innovative technologies.

Choose a cloud-based, integration-friendly content management platform. Advanced cloud platforms are optimized for building, deploying and managing digital content — and many, including the Drupal CMS, have advanced features to help different groups of users. They also offer robust application programming interfaces (APIs) that let you use existing technology and build for the future.

Do this now: Assess integrations. What technologies are you using? What applications and content do they need to integrate with? Are you integrating with mobile apps? Are there technologies you want to use but can't due to integration issues? What data sources will you need to access as you expand your use of artificial intelligence and automation?

Maintain a consistent look and feel

Consistency in design and behavior helps users of all abilities find and navigate information, sites and services. However, nearly 30% of respondents in the CDG survey said the look and feel of their jurisdiction's websites were inconsistent across departments and agencies. These best practices can improve consistency:

Develop a comprehensive style guide that covers visual elements, including colors, fonts, logos, button styles and image treatment. Implementing a strong multi-site strategy helps keep new sites consistent.

Build a library of reuseable user interface components and share them across your organization.

Use pre-built design templates for different page types within your website.

Manage brand assets like headers, logos and imagery so people can easily find and use the most current versions.

Centralize governance to standardize functionality and improve consistency, as well as enforce user-based access controls.

Communicate and train regularly. For example, some states require developers to attend annual accessibility training.

Do this now: Standardize on a single platform so teams can efficiently and consistently build, manage and update all the websites in your portfolio while keeping workflows and security intact.

Assess regularly and continuously improve

Assessment is not a one-time task. A site that's accessible now may not be after you've made changes.

Assess accessibility for people with disabilities. Hire users with disabilities to test all pages on your site and provide input on the design. Scan your site and mobile apps regularly to track their accessibility and compliance with WCAG.³

Assess mobility/responsive design. Make sure web pages and functions render properly regardless of the device or screen size.

Assess overall user experience. Conduct user testing; use heat map tools to understand user behavior, patterns and process flows; and analyze research-based usability heuristics to identify common user experience issues. Structure content and user interfaces based on your findings.

Do this now: Seek a partner or professional services team to guide assessment and what you will do with results.

Get started

Making it easier for all individuals to access and use government websites does more than improve equity, compliance and quality of life. It also increases adoption of digital services, which helps agencies address staffing challenges and save money.

"When I was with the state of Utah, every transaction we could do effectively online saved about \$14. In a state with millions of people, you're saving millions of dollars," says former Utah Chief Technology Officer David Fletcher, who is now a CDG senior fellow.

Planning is crucial. A trusted partner or professional services team can help you audit the current state of your websites and content, plan next steps, and achieve your goals quickly and cost-effectively.

*This piece was written and produced by the Government Technology Content Studio,
with information and input from Acquia.*

1. Center for Digital Government survey of 132 state and local government leaders. Digital Experiences in Government. February 2024.
2. <https://www.afb.org/barriers-digital-inclusion-survey>
3. <https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag>



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