The New Accessibility Audit: A User-First Approach

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Introduction

More organizations than ever have committed to digital accessibility. By doing so, they're meeting legal compliance obligations, including the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). They're also making sure users of all abilities can navigate their digital experiences without facing barriers.

But to ensure usability for all, organizations must first understand what barriers are present in their live experiences. And this first step is where many go wrong.

When organizations are new to accessibility, most start by requesting a one-time report detailing every accessibility barrier across their entire website, app, or other digital property. This status-quo approach to auditing often takes months to complete, and the results are exhaustive. With hundreds—if not thousands—of issues to address, teams become overwhelmed, and they usually only manage to resolve a small percentage of the issues found.
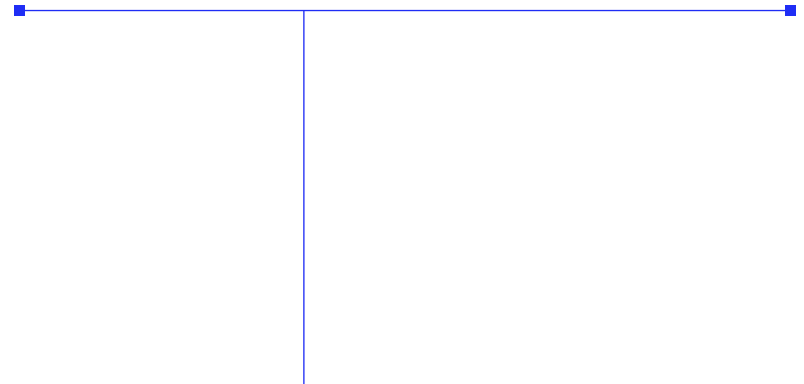
In our more than 20 years of experience providing digital accessibility solutions, we've learned that the vast majority of organizations achieve more meaningful and sustainable results through agile, flexible auditing. With an agile approach, testing is conducted rapidly on a focused part of a digital experience, and actionable results are delivered within days. This timely delivery of insights, focused on high-priority issues, replaces a single, monolithic report.

Agile audits may involve:

Key user flows:

Testing the paths users take to perform core tasks, like making a purchase

Templates:

Testing to ensure the common designs you use to create digital content are accessible— so the resulting content will be, too

Components:

Reviews that will surface issues with the repeatable building blocks that make up your digital experience

In this guide, we'll take a deep dive into one important pillar of an agile auditing strategy: testing user flows. We'll explore what this means, how it provides faster, more actionable insights, and why it's the evolution of the accessibility audit.
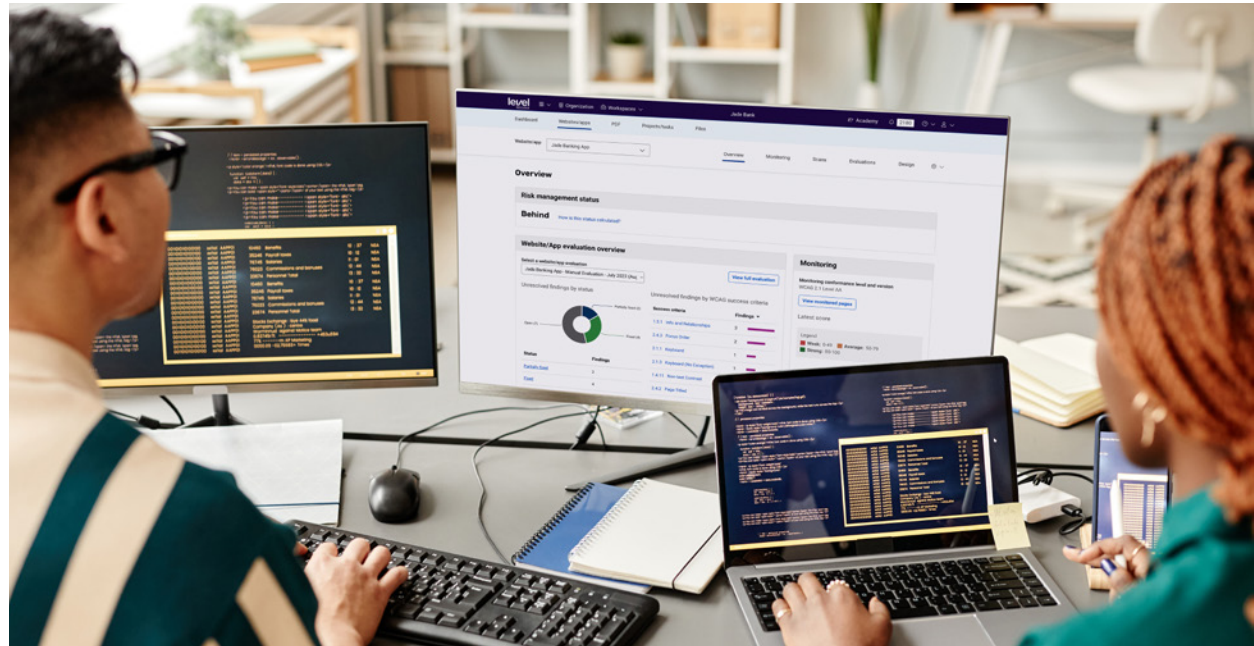
Why do so many teams struggle with the status quo?

In the status-quo approach to auditing, teams often wait for months while a third-party organization tests everything on their digital property and delivers an overwhelming list of findings. This exhaustive review might feel like the obvious first step, but it's an undesirable default for modern teams. Let's explore why.

It makes **prioritization challenging**.

One-time audits compile thousands of findings, from across an entire digital experience, in a single report. Even the most well-resourced teams tend to get overwhelmed by the process of organizing this long list and struggle to determine which findings to prioritize.

Results **lack context**.

When a point-in-time audit reveals a long list of accessibility bugs and their severity, the natural inclination may be to fix the "critical" ones first. But these severity ratings can lack context—they often don't detail the impact an issue may have on a heavily trafficked page or an important user flow. As a result, teams expend resources fixing bugs that affect few people, while neglecting those that disrupt common user journeys.

It's a **point-in-time, static approach**, but digital experiences are dynamic.

Digital experiences change—they're constantly being updated and expanded to evolve with technology and meet users' needs. When teams evaluate an entire digital experience in a single, one-off audit, they receive only a point-in-time snapshot of its accessibility. This means these types of audits quickly become outdated and irrelevant as the experience evolves. Months spent on an initial evaluation, and additional time devoted to remediation work, suddenly become obsolete.

Bottom line: there's a far more effective, actionable, and sustainable approach to auditing that many organizations are missing.
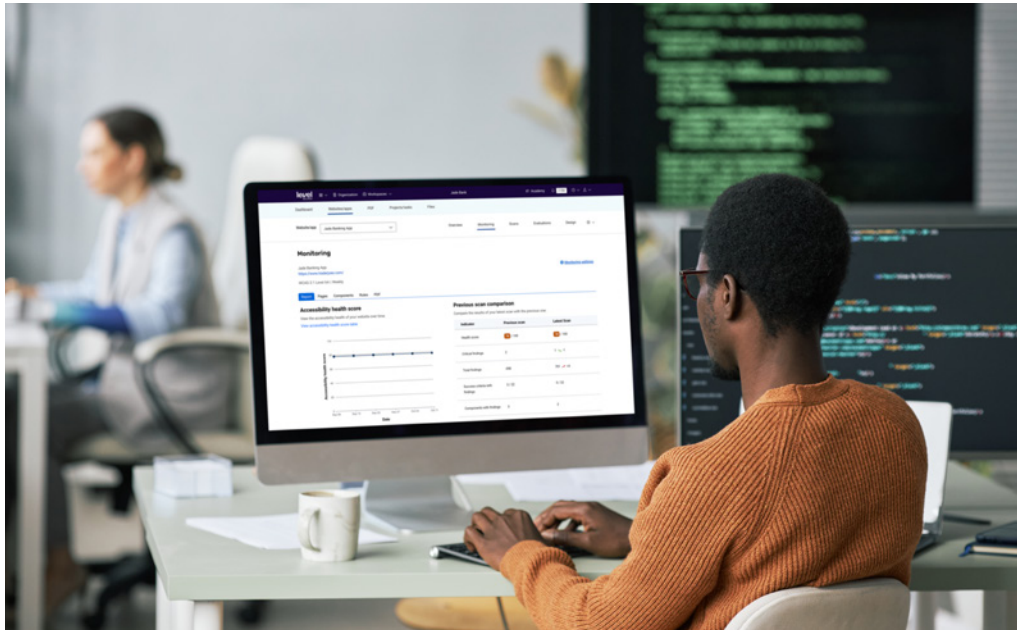
An **agile approach** to auditing: Testing user flows

With an agile approach, teams sidestep the test-everything status quo and shift to testing and fixing smaller segments of a digital experience more quickly. The cornerstone of this approach is testing key user flows.

In this section, we'll explore how this type of auditing works, and explain why testing and reporting on user flows is integral to efficiently, effectively, and sustainably measuring the accessibility and compliance of any digital experience.

What does it mean to **test** user flows?

Testing user flows evaluates the common paths users take to complete a task. Depending on the type of business, and its product or service offering, a priority user flow might consist of the journey a customer takes to:

- Complete a purchase
- Request a product demo

- Download important account documents
- Enroll in a class or program

This auditing method focuses exclusively on the pages and components that make up those specific user journeys—ones that are critical to business objectives. As an example, if a user can't complete your online checkout process (a key user flow), agile auditing isolates this flow, identifies any barriers present within it, and, in a matter of days, provides your team with a manageable set of issues to correct. Prioritization is clear, and fixing your broken checkout process has an immediate impact on your business's bottom line.

Testing user flows involves both automated and manual evaluation. As is the case with any digital accessibility testing, automation can flag common errors, but it's important to supplement that automated testing with manual review—evaluating certain features and applying judgment to identify accessibility issues that only a human can detect

For the most reliable, authentic results, this manual review should take place in conjunction with use case testing. Also called functional testing, use case testing involves a native user of assistive technology (AT) completing a "use case"—that is, the steps required to complete a core task—with that AT. A use case typically consists of four to five steps and generally covers the entirety of a user flow, although in some cases it may only represent a portion of a user flow.

What are the **advantages** of testing user flows?

It mirrors legal requirements.

Many accessibility laws, including the ADA, mandate that digital experiences are usable for people with disabilities—not that organizations fix 100 percent of issues 100 percent of the time. An accessibility error on a page that gets little to no traffic is much less likely to prompt a user complaint, or a potential lawsuit, than an error in a priority user flow. Testing key user flows enables organizations to gain rapid, actionable insight into core compliance questions and swiftly address any concerns about non-compliance.

It aligns with organizational priorities.

Teams can start by testing and optimizing user flows that are integral to broader business or compliance objectives—such as a checkout flow that's critical to sales—then move on to lower-priority paths until all issues are addressed. By tying accessibility work to these higher-priority objectives, teams increase the likelihood that accessibility will remain a priority for everyone in the organization.

It's manageable.

By testing a series of user flows, teams can break an initially unwieldy project into bite-sized pieces. This makes the process of addressing accessibility barriers less overwhelming and easier to execute.

It's fast.

Exhaustive, one-time audits can take months to complete, while testing user flows can be performed relatively quickly, with results returned in a matter of days. This enables teams to swiftly identify and remediate business-impacting issues as their experience evolves, rather than scrambling to address a backlog of issues that will soon be irrelevant. Additionally, teams can set up automated user flow scans that deliver rapid insights on flows that have already been evaluated, flagging newly introduced errors in real time.

It aligns with how teams build digital experiences.

Testing user flows is about tackling smaller projects in regular sprints, reflecting how most design and development teams work today. To plan their work, teams typically focus on specific areas or capabilities of a digital property—not the entire thing. Because this approach to auditing assesses specific functionalities, assigning ownership for remediation is straightforward, and teams can easily integrate accessibility work into their familiar workstreams.

It centers on user experience.

Digital accessibility is ultimately about making experiences accessible. By testing user flows, teams evaluate the ways in which real, human users complete a sequence of important tasks. This is fundamentally a more logical and inclusive approach to accessibility work.

"Our agile approach is really taking requirements and breaking them into smaller bites and chunks of work. That allows us to get to market faster, but also allows us to pivot. If there are flaws within that product or service, or if there are opportunities to improve, we're able to do it faster. For us, it's a three-week sprint."

Dewayne Walton,
VP , Digital Accessibility Governance, Chief Technology Office,
Wells Fargo

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Improving UX for everyone with Level Access

With our support for testing key user flows, you'll gain immediate insight into accessibility barriers on the most important parts of your digital experience, making the greatest impact on the overall user experience (UX).

Our team of testers includes daily users of assistive technology, so you'll have an in-depth understanding of how users with various needs and abilities will interact with your digital experience, including the barriers they encounter. Additionally, you can supplement our manual evaluation with anytime automated testing of user flows in the Level Access Platform or through our browser extension.

What's more? Our experts will support you with actionable guidance on prioritizing and addressing findings, so you're never at a standstill. And with our platform's monitoring capabilities and dashboards, you can easily track and report on your progress toward organizational goals, supporting your ongoing accessibility program.

Accessibility testing that meets
your needs, on your timeline

Our full suite of accessibility testing services is designed to align with organizations' unique needs and priorities, providing actionable feedback. We'll test digital properties that are already live, prioritizing the critical paths your users take, but we also evaluate wireframes and designs, reducing accessibility barriers before they make their way into development.

▪ Detailed design and wireframe evaluations

▪ Functional testing of common components

▪ Manual and automated testing of user flows

▪ Evaluation of digital properties to complete a VPAT

▪ Manual and automated testing of document/PDF accessibility

Let's get started

When you're ready to streamline your accessibility testing strategy as part of a sustainable, successful accessibility program, we're ready to support you.

Engage with our team today.

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