

Getting Started with Agile Accessibility

A five-step guide



Introduction



There's only one effective way to create accessible digital experiences: an agile approach. But what does that mean in practice?

In this guide, we'll explain the basic principles of agile accessibility and outline five steps for efficiently and sustainably serving all users.

We'll cover how to remediate digital experiences that are already live and embed accessibility into the creation of new ones.



■ Agile accessibility 101: **What** it is and **why** it matters

Agile accessibility incorporates accessibility into every phase of the digital experience life cycle, from ideation and design through development, testing, and deployment. It's about continuous iteration to improve existing digital experiences every step of the way. It's a departure from the status-quo process of testing an experience for accessibility after it's been developed—or worse, launched—and scrambling to fix issues at this late stage (a process referred to as “break/fix”).

In contrast to the reactive status quo, where teams are trapped in a costly and inefficient break/fix cycle, agile accessibility is the most efficient and effective method to achieve sustainable accessibility. When organizations proactively and consistently address accessibility throughout the digital experience life cycle, they save time, money, and energy. They also shorten timelines for functional delivery because addressing accessibility doesn't interfere with the development roadmap.

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Because an agile approach embeds accessibility in teams' existing workflows, it's a commitment to continuous learning. Over time, teams gain the knowledge and skills required to create accessible experiences by default. This leads to improved brand loyalty and reduced legal risk.

“We had to shift the culture and mindset around accessibility to bring it to the forefront. Level Access helps us work accessibility into the beginning stages of product development, around ideation, and the impact is immeasurable.”

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



How to make your digital accessibility program agile

With this understanding in mind, it's time to put agile principles into practice. Use the following five steps to incorporate agile accessibility into your product development life cycle—streamlining work and strengthening your digital experiences for all.

1

Shift **focus** to prioritize **key user flows**.

2

Monitor accessibility on an **ongoing** basis.

3

Evaluate the accessibility of all new **designs**.

4

Integrate accessibility testing into your **development** environment.

5

Stay agile—and accountable—by **establishing** a **governance** framework.

Train your team to take action

Agile accessibility requires a high level of cross-functional collaboration. Every team involved in the digital experience life cycle needs the necessary skills to embed accessibility into their day-to-day work. As you start your shift to agile, invest in role-specific training to help individual teams understand the critical responsibilities required to create accessible experiences—and more easily adopt the five steps outlined in this guide. Don't limit training to technical functions: by also educating non-technical teams, like marketing, you can incorporate accessibility into both the content development life cycle and the product development life cycle for an integrated digital accessibility program.

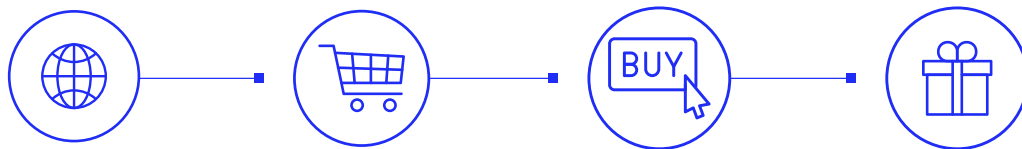
1

Shift **focus** to prioritize **key user flows**

If you're new to digital accessibility, you might think you need a one-time evaluation of every element on your website or other digital experience. You don't. Testing this way yields hundreds if not thousands of findings, leaving teams with overwhelming laundry lists of problems to solve. And the longer the list, the harder it is to know where to start.

If your organization is already addressing digital accessibility, you're all too familiar with this predicament. And you're more than ready for an alternative.

Instead of requesting a one-off, exhaustive evaluation, shift your focus to prioritize testing key user flows. User flows refer to the specific paths that users take to complete core tasks on a digital experience; for example, completing a purchase on an e-commerce website or booking an appointment with a healthcare provider.



Work with a third-party solution provider to determine which user flows are most important to your organization, and then test those flows for accessibility issues. Start by prioritizing paths that have a high volume of traffic and that play a critical role in business performance (such as a form-filling, booking, or checkout function). Then, move on to less integral user flows as you remove barriers across the rest of your digital experience.

Since user flows consist of a limited set of pages, they're far more manageable to remediate than the thousands of issues flagged from a point-in-time, test-everything approach. Testing user flows is also the most user-centric approach to evaluation: it allows organizations to empathize with the journeys real users take to complete their goals.

Additionally, testing user flows keeps teams focused by making it easier to organize and delegate projects. You've already prioritized the most important parts of your digital experience, so you'll be confident that you're delivering meaningful, high-impact results from day one.

Finally, testing user flows mirrors legal requirements. Legal requirements don't focus on fixing every page of your digital experience, they require it to be usable for people with disabilities. An issue outside of a key user flow likely has minimal impact on usability.

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Monitor accessibility on an ongoing basis

Once you've made your digital experiences accessible to all users, you need to keep them that way. Digital accessibility isn't a one-and-done project: digital experiences are constantly evolving, and as your code and content change, new issues will inevitably arise. The next step in your agile accessibility journey is to implement monitoring tools that quickly identify errors so that you can prioritize these problems as they emerge.

Monitoring refers to the regularly scheduled scanning of digital experiences against accessibility standards, such as the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#). By regularly checking for and addressing accessibility barriers, you'll avoid creating a long, unmanageable backlog of items for remediation.

Various digital accessibility software platforms offer automated monitoring capabilities. Choose a provider that doesn't only surface problems across your digital experiences, but also prescribes a course of action in order to remediate these issues. This makes it easy to resolve critical accessibility bugs before they impact a significant number of users.

“Accessibility is a practice. It's always unfinished. You can get to a point where you're efficient, but it's never really done. It's just a way of doing business, a way of life.”

Dr. Stephen Framil,
Director and Corporate Global Head of Accessibility,
Merck



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Evaluate the accessibility of all new designs

At this point, you've successfully remediated issues impacting your key user flows and started tackling less critical problems across the rest of your digital experiences. You've implemented the tools necessary to quickly catch any bugs that emerge in the future. But as your library of digital experiences expands, maintaining the accessibility of existing experiences is only half the battle.

To build a fully agile accessibility program, prioritize accessibility in the earliest stages of the digital experience life cycle: ideation and design. When designers consider the needs of all users in their wireframes, component libraries, and even in their style guides, it helps ensure that accessibility is being built into experiences from day one. An expert partner will review and provide feedback on your designers' work before it gets shipped to development.

"We've worked with Level Access to test the design of our new website components. As a result, we have no concerns that, as our developers build them out, we're going to be ahead of the game."

Clasonda Armstrong-Grandison,
Director of UX,
United Airlines



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Integrate accessibility testing into your **development** environment

By upskilling your design team with the knowledge and resources to create accessible concepts, you've taken meaningful steps toward the creation of accessible experiences. But accessibility bugs can still emerge during development—and it's far more efficient and cost-effective to catch these problems at this stage than after deployment.

To stay agile, equip developers with tools they can use to check their code for accessibility barriers and address issues before digital experiences are live. For example, some digital accessibility software solutions enable developers to rapidly evaluate key user flows and components, as well as entire assets, when experiences are still in a staging environment.

Incorporate accessibility checks into your existing test automation process by choosing a solution that integrates with quality assurance (QA) tools like Cucumber and Mocha. To further weave accessibility into your existing development processes, invest in role-specific training for developers, and ensure your accessibility tool kit integrates with your team's project management systems.

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Stay agile—and accountable— by **establishing a governance** framework

You've laid the foundation for an effective, agile digital accessibility program. You have processes in place for strategically catching and remediating accessibility barriers in existing assets, and your design and development teams are keeping inclusion top-of-mind. Now, it's important to sustain your momentum. To stay accountable for lasting progress, you'll need to implement governance: the practice of setting clear accessibility standards for your organization and consistently tracking compliance with these standards.

As a first step, you'll want to create a global accessibility policy: an internal document that outlines the specific accessibility standards your organization will uphold. These should include clear technical guidelines for digital experiences you create and maintain, and may detail processes for procuring accessible digital products from third parties.

Once you have an official accessibility policy, start tracking whether your organization is following through on these commitments. Digital accessibility software tools that support governance will allow you to monitor how well your organization is performing against the compliance standards specified in your policy. For example, if you've committed to keeping the number of critical issues on your website below a specific threshold, governance tools will track this metric on an ongoing basis and indicate if it exceeds your threshold. You can then swiftly respond when any areas of an experience violate your policy.

Governance tools consolidate the status of all digital assets in one single, centralized location. This makes it easy to benchmark the overall performance of your digital accessibility program against a clear definition of success and report on progress to key stakeholders in a timely manner. You can also quickly identify areas for improvement so you know where to direct resources in order to minimize risk and meet your compliance objectives.



The **advanced** agile accessibility program

Organizations with mature digital accessibility programs may have reached a state where the majority of critical accessibility errors in their digital experiences have been resolved. Rather than starting by testing and remediating key user flows, these organizations can begin their agile journey by focusing on embedding accessibility into the creation of new content by evaluating new designs and then integrating accessibility testing into their test automation process during development. They should then monitor experiences for new issues—but will find few when they address accessibility early and often throughout the product development life cycle. Finally, advanced organizations need to establish governance frameworks to drive internal accountability as they sustain their success.



We're on **your** team

Digital accessibility is an ongoing practice, and the most successful approach is agile. Work is embedded into every phase of the experience creation life cycle and never finished.

Embracing this journey requires a shift in culture and mindset—not just process. But with the right support and resources in place, you'll accomplish even more than you set out to achieve.

As the market-leading digital accessibility solution provider, Level Access offers a combination of software and expert managed services to help organizations implement—and sustain—an agile approach to online inclusion.

Our customers benefit from:

- Detailed wireframe and design evaluations
- Automated and manual testing, delivering actionable results in as few as 10 days, enabling you to prioritize fixing high-risk issues
- A suite of developer tools that integrate with your existing QA tech stack
- Project management integrations, including for Jira
- Comprehensive monitoring and reporting
- A governance dashboard for defining an organizational policy and tracking conformance to that policy
- Live and self-paced accessibility training, including role-specific education, to upskill your team

“When we started our accessibility journey, Level Access met us where we were. The team guided us and supported us every step of the way. And now our program is flourishing, with Level Access still by our side.”

Dr. Stephen Framil,
Director and Corporate Global Head of Accessibility,
Merck



Let's get started

Ready to start—or scale—your accessibility program using an agile approach?

Engage with our team today to learn how the Level Access solution supports accessibility at every stage of the experience creation life cycle.

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