JADU

DRIVING A DIGITAL
ACCESSIBILITY
CULTURE

How it's time the technology and public sector
work together and do the right thing

A whitepaper - Mark Chillingworth

INTRODUCTION

**Customers, citizens and regulators are demanding a change.
Accessibility can no longer and should never be an after-thought.**

The internet has defined the first quarter of this century. Yet throughout its dramatic and transformative history, those who should have benefited most from the internet have been, in many cases, excluded. Now, more than ever, with the rise of Generative AI and Large Language Models (LLM) is the time to deliver accessible digital services.

These latest technologies have the potential to improve accessibility, but as with their predecessors, if there

is no concerted effort by the technology industry and its partners and customers, then once again the opportunity will be lost; and once again accessibility will take a step backwards.

As has been seen with previous iterations of technology, the public sector often begins with an eye on accessibility, but loses momentum. However, as we'll see in this whitepaper, there are international regulatory demands coming that mean both technology

providers and the public sector must keep the momentum going.

Organisations cannot claim to meet the inclusive expectations of their customers, citizens, partners and employees if they do not provide digital accessibility. In 2023, it would be unacceptable to prevent access to a physical building for those with a disability, yet the same level of access is routinely denied online.

That denial increases costs for the organisation, excludes

service users - including the most vulnerable in society from accessing digital services and systems, misses business opportunities and prevents cultural diversity.

Accessibility is, in plain language, good for business, ethically right, bound by legal compliance, and simplifies and provides access to digital services for all.

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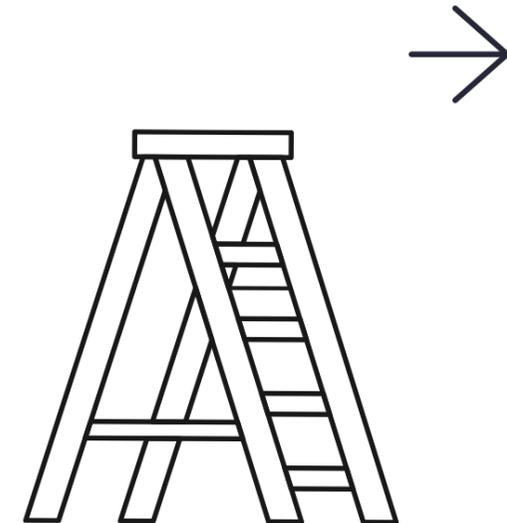
Organisations at the forefront of digital accessibility across America, Australia and the United Kingdom share in this whitepaper why they're passionate about delivering accessible digital services, and the benefits to their organisation and its customers or citizens.

Digital accessibility is a cultural change to the organisation; those organisations developing strong digital inclusivity reveal how to develop a culture of digital access, the role of technology and the senior leadership team, as well as look ahead to how the next wave of technologies will impact and increase the need for digital accessibility to be at the forefront of digital transformation strategies.

The technology providers and the public sector must work together to ensure technology is equitable.

IN COLLABORATION WITH

AbilityNet

hassell inclusion

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KONICA MINOLTA

LOGAN CITY COUNCIL

ROCHDALE BOROUGH COUNCIL

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Wigan Council

PART 1

In the wake of #MeToo

The 2020s have, to date, been a decade of disruption and significant social change. Triggered in part by the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a rising awareness and demand for a change in attitudes towards our natural and digital environments and how fellow citizens are treated.

Regulators are responding, placing financial penalties on organisations that do not provide sufficient digital accessibility.

In the USA, the Websites and Software Applications Accessibility Act, began its journey through the US Senate in September 2022, reflects the digital environment and demands that accessibility is about software applications as well as websites.

As a result, this legislation realises that the web is a platform and that many interactions with citizens and customers are via web-hosted applications and must meet the same levels of accessibility as a pure content website. This will benefit customers, citizens and employees. Using the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, the new Software Applications Accessibility Act is set to ensure there are technical standards that digital leaders will need to adhere to.

The Act states its aims as: "To establish uniform accessibility standards for websites and applications of employers, employment agencies, labour organisations, joint labour-management committees, public entities, public accommodations, testing entities, and commercial providers, and for other purposes."

Not only will organisations in the USA have to comply with the Websites and Software Applications Accessibility Act, but the Department of Justice has stated that all local and state governments are required to meet new regulations as part of ADA or "suffer legal action". *

The European Accessibility Act (EAA) will come into force in 2025 and follows the EU Web Accessibility Directive. EAA will place regulatory demands on private sector organisations in the largest single market and bring the commercial sector in line with the public sector across the EU, which has had to provide good accessibility since September 2020. Like its USA cousin, EAA covers operating systems but also payment terminals, self-service ticket machines, information terminals and smartphones.

Together these two regulations in two of the most important global markets will demand that digital services are compliant with Level AA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

* **silktide.com/blog/the-doj-is-finally-setting-web-accessibility-regulations-are-you-prepared**

EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Regulators are rarely ahead of consumers and technology organisations. Both Acts follow in the wake of demands for change from society. In 2020, 10,982 ADA Title III lawsuits were filed in federal courts, and the number of cases increased.

As this paper was being written, a $240,000 fine was issued to Los Angeles Community College District for poor accessibility of its maths course. *

The pandemic accelerated the digitisation of society, as education, retail, financial services and medicine all moved to online services. Analysts talk of a decade of digital transformation being achieved in months. This leap forward has left many behind, though; in the US, there are over 61 million adults with disabilities, 14.1 million in the UK live with some form of disability, whilst one in six Australians are registered with some form of disability. All three nations have ageing populations and increasing levels of disability. "Regulations make people sit up and listen, even if it is only in terms of risk management," says Amy Low, Service Delivery Director at AbilityNet, an accessibility specialist.

Leading organisations are aware of this demographic change. "Access is a key thing for us in the physical world of an airport," says Darren MacLeod, Director of Corporate Operational Support at Highlands and Islands Airports in Scotland. "You'll see high-quality signage in yellow and black, for example, so it makes sense that the digital experience is the same." MacLeod's airport is a vital transport hub for one of Europe's most remote and sparsely populated regions. Air travel ensures islanders can receive medical treatment and supplies.

As Covid-19 forced organisations to shut their doors, their digital channels became essential to those with access issues. "Overnight people wanted information online, such as Covid testing in our borough, and it highlighted the importance of accessibility across our digital services," says Tracey Boffey, Service Manager - Web, Digital Development and Innovation at Wigan Council. "It was important to make sure that everyone had equal access," says Kylie Green, Corporate Customer Experience Coordinator for Logan City Council in Queensland, Australia.

The spectre of the pandemic may be receding, but new accessibility challenges remain, Green says: "The cost of living pressures in Australia have increased over the last few years."

Logan City Council serves one of the most diverse communities in Australia, with a considerable number of its 350,000 population among the lower socio-economic status. The local authority is, therefore, central to supporting those most in need.

* **www.lflegal.com/2023/05/blind-college-students-jury-verdict**
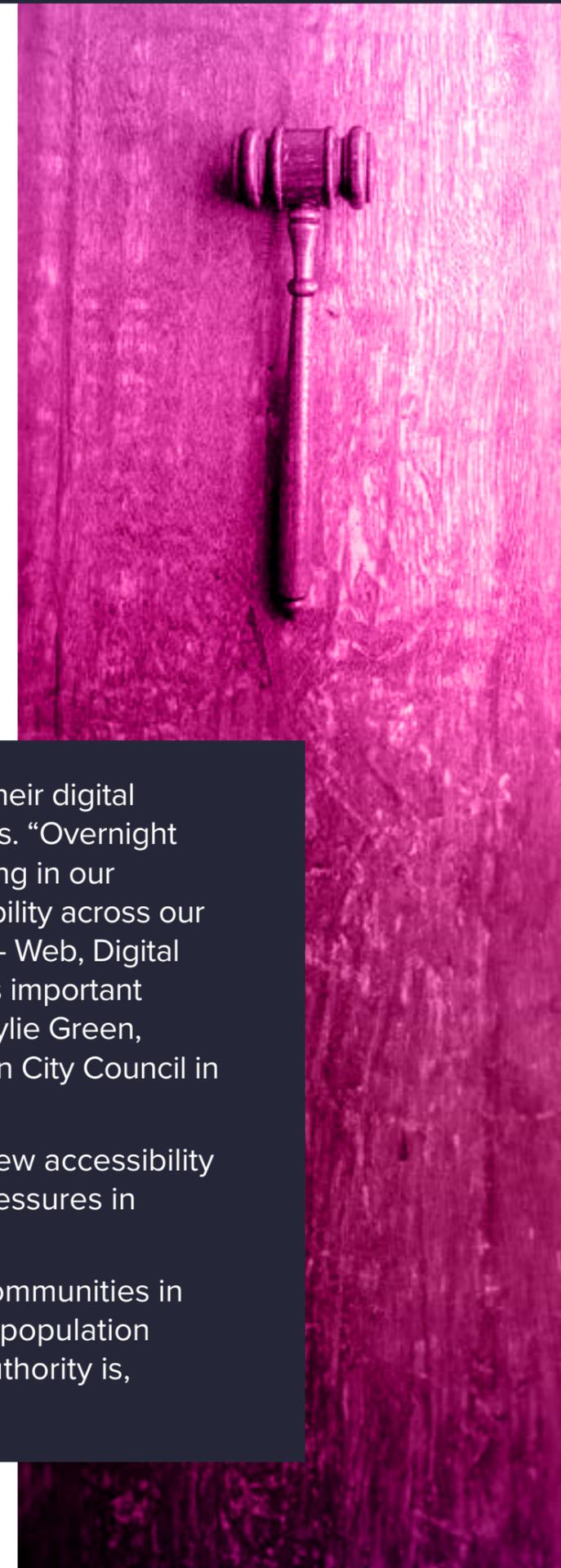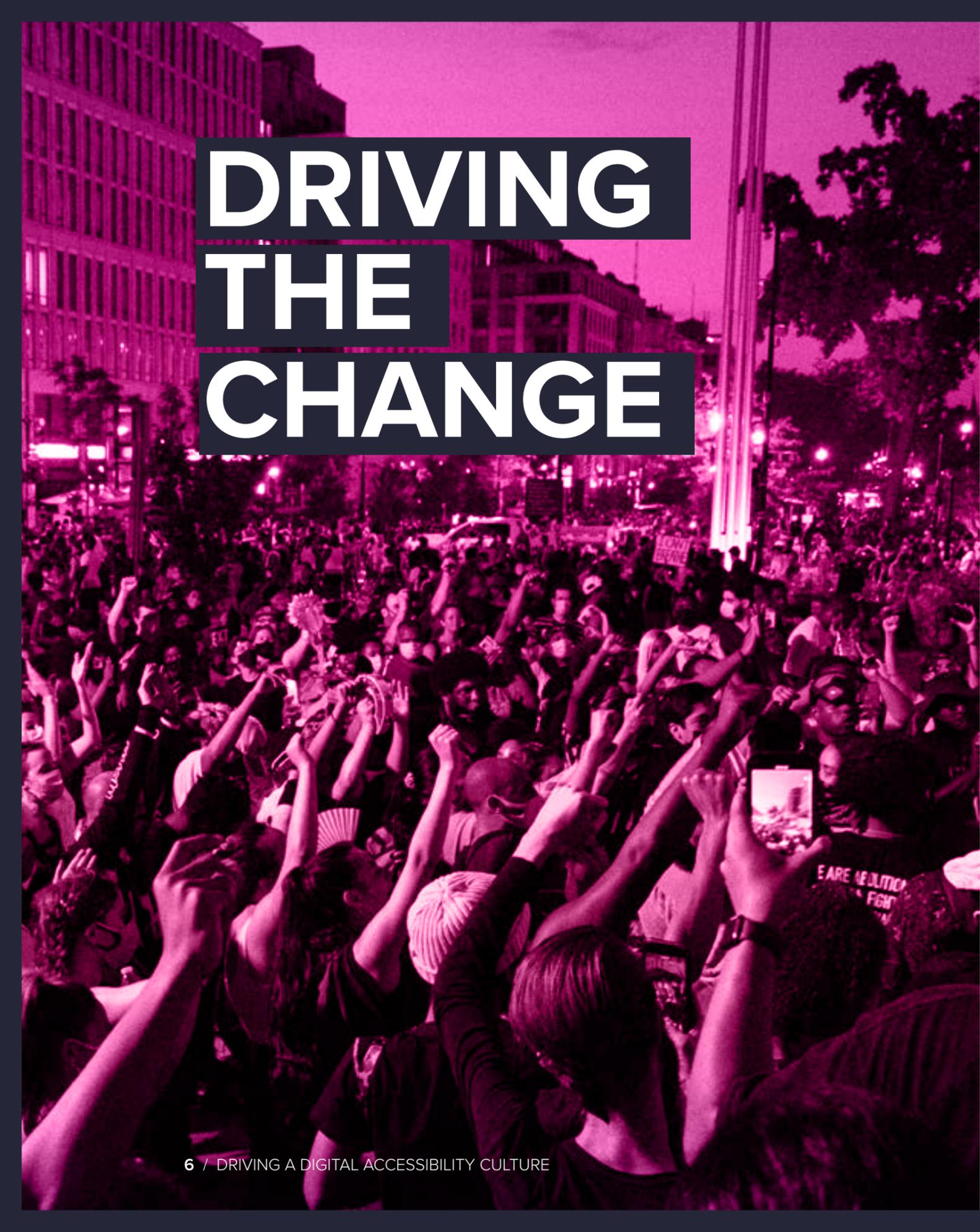
DRIVING THE CHANGE

A series of events, ranging from racial abuse to a closer connection to the natural world during the pandemic lockdowns, led to a societal expectation for a more inclusive society.

However, digital accessibility has yet to receive the same level of attention. "When organisations looked at diversity and inclusion, they tended to look at gender and ethnicity, as these have high-powered influencing groups," says Peter Bricknell, Chief Product Officer of strategic accessibility consultancy, Hassell Inclusion.

"Many organisations are yet to consider accessibility as equally worthy of focus and investment to help their customers and employees who need accessibility. He adds that many organisations see accessibility as a bolt-on to help a few people at the edge of society, rather than the core to widen access for the whole of society."

To counter this view, Hassell Inclusion uses eight world-famous people as examples of individuals in need of digital accessibility; these include Mark Zuckerberg (colour blind) and Elon Musk (autistic). Bricknell adds that society is making greater use of accessibility technologies. "65% of society use subtitles as part of watching a video.

Subtitles used to be seen as a niche part of technology, but in fact, everyone benefits." Boffey at Wigan adds: "The pandemic has been quite positive in terms of people having to think about what they are putting online."

Despite some anger against those termed woke and talk of a culture war, the benefits of increased inclusion and now the drive towards greater accessibility will remain in place. "This legislation makes it easier for citizens to hold public services to account," says Scott Anderson, Product Manager, Hyland Software. The greatest risk is not a compliance failure but losing the faith of citizens.

PART 2

"We need to understand the significance of our customers and the their evolving needs," says Rahna Riley, Digital Services Lead at Rochdale Borough Council. "Without this understanding, how can we ensure we deliver the right solutions, enhance usability, and boost user engagement?

ACCESSIBILITY BENEFITS

Embracing accessibility allows us to gain profound insights into citizens and customers, leading to reduced costs and potentially higher customer loyalty. In essence, accessibility brings a multitude of business advantages and is ethically the right thing to do.

"The worst examples are where there are accessibility barriers that completely stop progress in a digital journey. So often, disabled users can get so far and then experience the digital equivalent of a door slamming in their face.

Frustratingly, this is often towards the end of the digital journey," explains Low of AbilityNet. "We had a blind colleague show how they are completely excluded from booking a flight because the payment options were not discoverable by his screenreader.

These are often simple problems to solve, but there is a lack of awareness," says Suraj Kika, CEO of Jadu of an example that was demonstrated to the technology company as part of its internal development of accessibility skills.

Hassell Inclusion found in its research: "If companies don't embrace accessibility, they could be alienating a huge range of potential customers, employees and advocates who they have effectively excluded from their digital services and communications," the State of Accessibility report states.

Low at AbilityNet adds: "Times and attitudes are changing, people will think twice before buying from an organisation that doesn't care about catering for the broadest audience and they don't want to work for an organisation that doesn't welcome employees from all backgrounds or characteristics." Demonstrating the risks of poor accessibility.

Tackling that exclusion was the trigger for a greater understanding of its citizens by Logan City Council. "We wanted to really understand how much we were disadvantaging our community," Green says. For an Australian local authority, this meant not only the technology but also the language used.

In the Highlands, MacLeod says that being aware of the citizens and their needs is central to digitisation and overall good service. "If you look at the demographics, we have an ageing population.

So the ability to have access to tools is really important as we recognise the need to be inclusive." Like Green in Australia, MacLeod has addressed language as well as technology.

"A lot of aviation makes use of acronyms, and we want to make it as consumable as possible and take some of the aviation-specific language out." The challenge he faced was that regulations demanded some of that language remain in place.
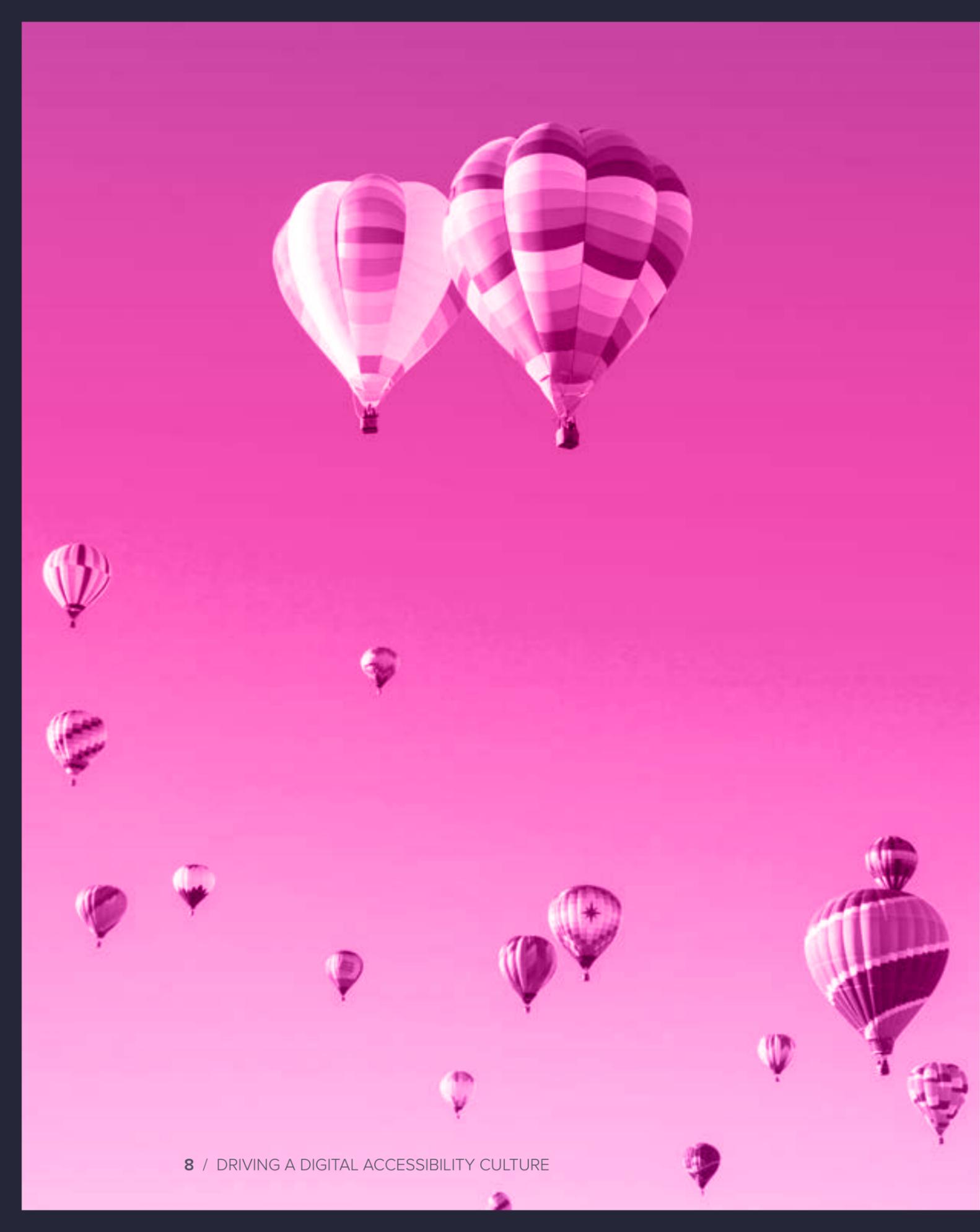
Benefits for all

The correlation of a better understanding of the customer or citizen is increased revenue, efficiency and business outcomes.

"The risk of not doing good digital accessibility is adding pressure on to the staff," MacLeod says of how digital accessibility has downstream benefits in a more operationally efficient airport.

"People no longer arrive at the airport and then say I need assistance," he says of how these travellers use an accessible website to pre-book their needs. Rochdale's Riley adds: "It is one thing to understand the customer; we have to use technology to leverage the key performance indicators (KPI) and identify areas of improvement in service and reduce our costs."

Green in Australia has seen those public sector reductions as a result of good accessibility. "We have a lot more people able to go to our website and resolve their issues. Previously we had a lot of channel shift to calling, and that was clogging up the phone lines.

We took 200,000 calls a year." She adds that if value for money is a key driver when considering the needs of the community, an online transaction significantly reduces the cost of service compared with a phone interaction. "We are seeing a higher conversion rate online and less of that channel shift now."

PART 3

Accessibility is a culture

Throughout the interview process for this whitepaper, organisations stressed that delivering good digital accessibility was not something that the IT department solely had to resolve. In some cases, the IT department was not involved at all.

Digital accessibility is about the citizen and the customer, and therefore ensuring good access is the responsibility of every department of the organisation and the partners it selects to deploy accessible digital experiences.

Each of the organisations featured in this whitepaper has approached digital accessibility as a cultural change that transforms the entire organisation and the relationship with citizens and customers.

"We have a programme in the council that helps people across the organisation understand the benefits of accessibility," Riley in Rochdale says.

She adds that this programme started small and has grown and now is focused on upskilling all members of Rochdale Borough Council.
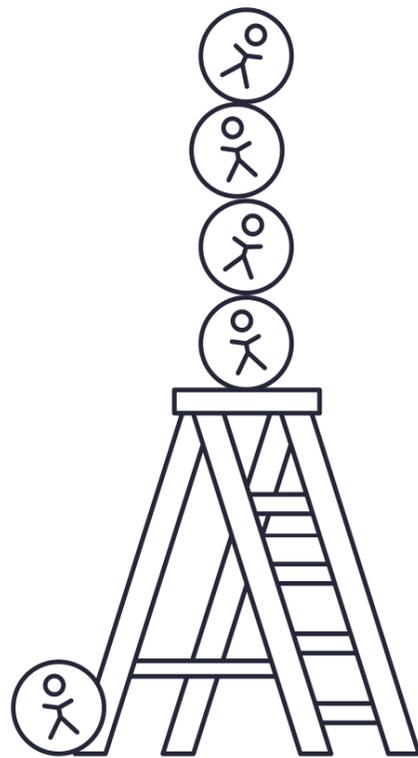
Tracey Boffey at Wigan Council agrees: "It is an education piece across the authority. That has been a big shift in the culture. It was a few people; now accessibility is not the responsibility of the web team. It is everybody's responsibility." The web team, she says, is now the guide to help business lines across Wigan Council achieve good accessibility.

"It has been an ongoing focus since 2015 when we had grassroots groups practising accessibility and wanting to improve access," says Steven Nguyen, Product Manager and Service Owner, Collaboration and Web Services, University of Minnesota. A central approach was adopted to ensure the cultural change really took hold: "It is about changing culture and mindset and helping people be in the shoes of someone with an impairment; for example, how do you navigate without a keyboard or a mouse?"

Nguyen is honest about the challenge, though: "Changing mindsets is a hard thing, as people are embedded in the way of doing things," he says. The rise of regulatory demands may benefit leaders looking to seed a culture of digital accessibility.

The UK's public sector has had accessibility legislation in place since 2018. "It gave us the power to say no to people. We are not compromising, and we need to think about the user," Boffey at Wigan says.

Nguyen at the University of Minnesota has a similar experience of being empowered: "It gives us the opportunity to get on the soap box and say we really need to make content accessible." Today the university has accessibility ambassadors. "There are three factors to change; you can do change for them, with them or to them," Nguyen says; he favours change with people. Green at Logan City Council adds: "There was a lot of consultation throughout the project, and we had to take everyone on a journey to discover the benefits to council and the community."

Anderson at Hyland Software adds he is seeing greater levels of cross-functional collaboration on digital accessibility projects. "In a recent experience with a major US State we found there were not just IT people asking the questions, and it was really helpful."

Clean PDFs

Creating a culture of accessibility has led to further efficiency benefits for the local authorities and organisations interviewed.

All of these organisations have cleaned up and simplified their business processes and reduced the number of PDF documents that they publish and host - PDFs can be challenging to make accessible.

"We had over 8000 PDFs on the site," Green says. Her experience is shared by all the organisations interviewed. "We are looking to continually improve the documents, and we are significantly reducing the number of documents so that we deliver more and more HTML pages," Riley at Rochdale Borough Council says. "It flags up 'do you need that' opportunities," says Steve Harrow of Wigan Council. "We did some work reviewing the PDFs and those that were regularly accessed so that we could prioritise that information first."
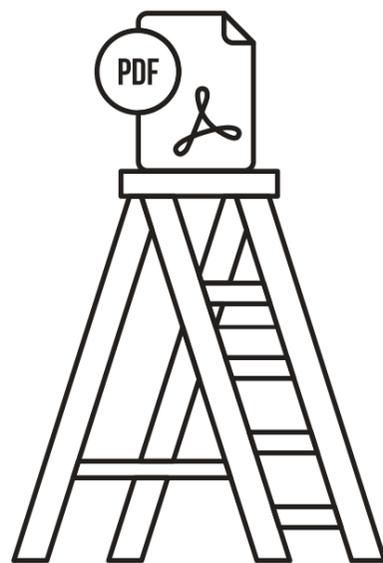
PART 4

Leadership role

Cultural change requires leadership. These organisations are leading the move to digital accessibility because their leadership understands the importance of the subject.

"We had sponsorship from our leadership to make accessibility improvements and bring everyone together to establish a digital access awareness campaign," says the University of Minnesota's Nguyen. "The provost made sure that there was training available for instructors and tutors to make sure that their content was accessible."

"That was the key to our success. Local government is a complex organisation, and everyone tends to work in their silos, but we had the support of the CEO and the executive leadership team," Green at Logan City Council says of the importance of high-level sponsorship. "It was a project that had significant interest from the board as it affected all areas of the business, and we were fully supported," adds MacLeod of the Highlands and Islands Airports.

Without backing from the top of the organisation, accessibility programmes fail to change the culture. All digital programmes are considered high priority, which can often mean accessibility gets pushed aside without senior-level support. "From an operational perspective, if the senior leadership team don't see the value, then they won't adopt and support it," adds Michael Thomas, Sales Director, at Konica Minolta.

Tech's leadership role

Just as public services organisations, their customer and technology teams are changing their culture to be more aware of accessibility, so too must the tech community.

The good news is that a small but growing number of leading technology providers have become aware of the need to improve accessibility. "As I have worked with Jadu and you build platforms from the ground up to be accessible, you realise how clunky some of the old technology was," says Anderson at Hyland Software. "A lot of software has been built without taking notice of accessibility and the functionality required," he says.

Jadu has been increasing its focus on accessibility, and founder Suraj Kika has stated that Jadu aims to become the most accessible platform in the world.

To reach this target, Jadu has invested in the skills of its developers. "One of the biggest investments we have made is in training our people, and to be honest, it was a challenge for them," Kika says.

With the skills in place, Jadu has been able to identify how it can improve its existing technology offering and ensure future technologies deliver great accessibility.

"There is so much that developers can do with CRM and web engagement to quickly deliver good accessibility," Kika adds. "It used to be the case that user testing was at the end of the process, but having

user testing expertise involved before the coding starts is really important," Anderson at Hyland says, adding that accessibility-focused user testers have increased in importance.

Both believe the adoption of Agile development processes by technology providers enables them to be leaders in accessibility.

Technology providers need to lead the accessibility agenda to not only improve existing technologies but to ensure the wave of technologies entering the workplace and society deliver accessibility improvements. As has been well documented by analysts and the media, Generative AI and large language models have the potential to reshape technology and society.

These technologies can have a highly positive impact on those with accessibility needs, but only if the technology sector leads their development ethically. "There is a change on the horizon when access and large language models will come together," says Konica Minolta's Michael Thomas. "There is a huge opportunity to shape technology positively and bring together some of the power of Generative AI and accessibility," says Kika.

"If you are visually impaired, then the ability to capture ideas is improved, so the real innovation is when there is a convergence of technologies," Kika adds to how the technology sector has a responsibility to bring these new technologies, accessibility, web experience and CRM together in a way that benefits all in society. He adds: "I think it is a massively exciting time, especially if you understand accessibility."

PART 5

Accessible design-led future

Artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, natural language processing (NLP) and ChatGPT dominate the popular discourse on technology.

There is a danger that this could drown out the topic of digital accessibility, but the next wave of technology can only succeed if digital accessibility is addressed.

"There are huge opportunities to shape technology positively and bring together Generative AI and accessibility," says Jadu CEO Kika. "Real innovation always happens when there is a convergence of technologies."

There are some challenges to reaching this nirvana, though, adds Thomas. Digital access devices such as smart speakers and digital assistants like Siri are not being treated as access devices. "They are seen as novelties because we are not thinking of our constituents using them as a functional device." There is anecdotal evidence that the elderly and those with disabilities are adopting these technologies, and digital accessibility will need to adapt to meet the needs of these end users.

Bricknell at Hassell Inclusion says that in organisations that have yet to develop a culture of digital accessibility, there is often an undercurrent that wants to make a change: "Designers are often more keen to do accessibility than is realised, they just don't know where to start in many cases." Green at Logan City Council, Australia, agrees and adds

that a from-the-ground-up approach has benefited the local authority. This enabled those involved to see that they were not necessarily losing functionality as part of the adoption of digital accessibility.

Agile plan

With a regulated environment and new technologies emerging, organisations will need a design-led approach to digital accessibility to ensure their strategy meets the needs of citizens, customers and regulations but is also adaptable to the pace of technological change.

"There is not one size that fits all with digital accessibility," Bricknell says of ensuring digital design considers the needs of all types of access challenges. "There is a range of needs and neurodiverse needs too. The important thing is to provide alternatives. When you design for different personas, you are giving people choice.

"I would love to see accessibility mentioned in the same breath as cybersecurity and data protection," Bricknell adds of how digital accessibility has to catch up with the two most recent trends in digital design.

Wigan Council's Harrow says digital accessibility is often accused of leading to functional and ugly design: "Our site is not flamboyant. But you can build something that is accessible and still look really good; it doesn't have to be plain. Accessibility is not a barrier; it is part of the design process."

PART 6

Conclusion

Organisations delivering digital accessibility can rightly claim to be digitally mature, customer or citizen-centric and operationally efficient. For too long digital accessibility has been treated as an after-thought in the rush to get new services online.

With the increased demand for regulatory compliance, digital accessibility has become central to the culture and digital ethos of an organisation, no matter its vertical market.

As this whitepaper demonstrates through the stories of organisations that have taken the lead on digital accessibility, the citizens, customers and organisation have benefited in equal measure. Organisations with good digital accessibility understand the needs of their communities, have cost-effective business processes and lower costs to serve.

As with all technology-inspired change, digital accessibility requires a change to the culture of the organisation, with the support of the senior leadership team. The cultural change has to take place; customers, citizens and regulators are demanding a change, and accessibility can no longer be an after-thought. As Rahna Riley of Rochdale Borough Council says: "Our work is never done; it is not a project with an end date." Accessibility is an opportunity, a challenge and the right thing to do.

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