



# OIT DEI

## VOLUME III: ACCESSIBILITY

Harmonize innovative strategies with shared experiences to explore actionable insights that enhance accessibility in both digital and physical spaces

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## OPENING REMARKS

Accessibility is all about removing barriers that prevent people with disabilities from participating fully in an environment, whether physical, digital, or social. It ensures that everyone, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities, has access to the same resources and opportunities. Think of it as designing products, devices, services, or environments for everyone as a default, including people who experience disabilities.

In the DEIA context, accessibility is about creating environments that invite people to join the orchestra and ensure they can participate as effectively as everyone else. It's about understanding and implementing measures that make fundamental, practical differences in people's lives, from automatic door openers to websites that support screen readers to policies that consider the needs of all participants.

Through this ebook, we explore practical approaches and share innovative strategies

from people at OIT who have made significant strides in DEIA. Through collaborative learning and shared experiences, we can learn to identify and harmonize together to help remove barriers. This volume provides practical insights and strategies from within and beyond our walls, detailing approaches to building inclusive spaces focusing on universal design principles and inclusive practices. We aim to provide you with actionable insights and tools.

This book is not just about defining accessibility but about teaching each other how to orchestrate an environment that anticipates barriers and celebrates the many individualities that make up this agency. Let's build on each other to create an agency that doesn't just respond to accessible experiences but anticipates and celebrates them at every turn. Together, we can set a standard for excellence that resonates well beyond the boundaries of our immediate community.

// by George Hoffmann



## ENHANCING AGENCY-WIDE COLLABORATION THROUGH ACCESSIBILITY

// with Aaron Allen



*Our recent conversation with the CMS Section 508 Program Manager Aaron Allen explored the significance of enhancing agency-wide collaboration through accessibility. Aaron shared his extensive experience in the field and offered insights into the importance of accessibility in the workplace and practical strategies for promoting an inclusive environment.*

### Aaron Allen: A Journey of Purpose and Inclusion

Aaron Allen's journey into accessibility began long before his current role as the CMS Section 508 Program Manager. His story started in 1992 when he entered government service, driven by a Center Director's initiative to hire people with disabilities. Initially, Aaron worked in customer service and supported state Medicaid agencies and pharmaceutical companies. It wasn't long before he

found himself drawn to the challenges and opportunities presented by the newly signed Section 508 law.

In the 1990s, the government began delving into accessibility under Section 508. Aaron volunteered to support the Office of Information Services (OIS) by testing large-scale applications to ensure they complied with the new regulations. This hands-on experience laid the foundation for his career in accessibility. He became

instrumental in supporting various initiatives at CMS, leading to his current role as the Section 508 Program Manager, which he assumed in August 2023.

### Embracing Accessibility: The Heart of Workplace Inclusion

For Aaron, accessibility in the workplace is more than a legal requirement; it's a crucial aspect of ensuring that people with disabilities can contribute fully to the workforce.

“People with disabilities bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the workforce,” Aaron explains. “They require the ability to utilize technology in an accessible manner to be full contributors.”

Section 508 was designed to address two primary goals: promoting the procurement of accessible technology by the government and facilitating the hiring and retention of individuals with disabilities within the federal workforce. Aaron emphasizes that the disability community has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, a concern that Section 508 aimed to address when it was created in the 1990s. CMS serves many U.S. citizens with disabilities through various programs, making it imperative for the agency to lead by example in accessibility.

**Transformative Stories: The Impact of Accessible Platforms**

Before the implementation of Section 508, many CMS applications were not ac-

cessible, creating significant challenges for employees with disabilities, including Aaron himself. One of the most striking examples Aaron shared was his struggle with email. When he first joined the agency, the email platform used, GroupWise, was not fully accessible. Simple tasks like sending and receiving emails were arduous and time-consuming.

Aaron had to draft emails in WordPerfect, perform spell checks, and then use keyboard commands to attach the document to the email client. Receiving emails involved a similar process of extracting text into a readable format before he could respond. What took most people a few minutes could take Aaron three times as long.

The introduction of Section 508 brought about a significant shift. Companies like Microsoft and Apple began to understand the importance of accessibility and made substantial improvements to their platforms. While these platforms are

not perfect, they are exponentially more accessible than the tools available 30 years ago.

**Building Bridges: Collaboration in the Workplace**

A culture of collaboration and mutual support marked Aaron’s early years at CMS. He fondly recalls how colleagues would readily assist each other, fostering a team dynamic that ensured tasks were completed efficiently. However, he acknowledges that today’s culture of political correctness sometimes makes people hesitant to ask for help, which can impede collaboration.

Aaron encourages individuals with disabilities to be vocal and open in the workplace. “There’s no shame in having a disability,” he asserts. “If you need assistance, you’ll find that others are more than willing to help. It’s a mindset that promotes learning and growth for everyone involved.”

**Tools for Success: Embracing Technology Through Accessible Collaboration**

Aaron highlights Zoom as a particularly effective meeting platform. While he finds Slack challenging due to its overall usability, he emphasizes the importance of exploring various tools to understand what works best for different needs.

Aaron uses a compelling analogy to illustrate this point: “Think of collaboration tools like screwdrivers. You might have a flathead screwdriver, which is excellent for specific tasks, but sometimes you’ll need a Philips head, a square head, or even an Allen wrench. Each tool has its unique purpose and is suited to tasks. Just as a single type of screwdriver won’t suffice for every job, relying on one collaboration tool won’t meet all accessibility needs.”

He advocates for a suite of tools tailored to various assignments and missions. “Exploring multiple tools and what they can and cannot do is more beneficial than relying on just one,” Aaron explains. “A suite of tools is essential for address-

ing the diverse accessibility challenges we face.”

**Paving the Path: Strategies for Promoting Accessibility**

Several strategies and practices have been implemented at CMS to promote accessibility, including training and information dissemination on creating accessible documents. Aaron stresses the importance of making accessibility a core consideration in procurement processes and ensuring all employees are trained in accessibility compliance.

One of Aaron’s key recommendations is promoting and implementing a policy and process centered around procuring information and communication technologies (ICT) with an “accessible first” mindset. When purchasing application software, training programs, and services, it is crucial to prioritize accessibility from the outset. This approach ensures that accessibility is integrated into the procurement process, reflecting the needs of the user population and championing the princi-

ple of inclusivity.

**Patience and Understanding: Keys to Success**

Aaron’s experience at CMS has taught him the value of patience and understanding on both sides of the accessibility equation. Developers and users must work together, sharing insights and addressing challenges collaboratively.

Aaron Allen’s journey and insights highlight the importance of accessibility in fostering collaboration and inclusivity within agencies. His story reminds us that with the right mindset, tools, and strategies, we can create a more accessible and supportive workplace for everyone.

He concludes this conversation with a beautiful quote, “As people start to know, they start to grow, and that knowledge is key to moving forward in creating other accessible software or other products.”



# FIRST THINGS FIRST

Accessibility first means integrating accessibility into every stage of our products and services. This mental framework means valuing the diverse ways individuals interact with the world first and then ensuring that all products, services, and environments are usable by as many people as possible.

*Becoming an ally in accessibility means knowing in what contexts people may have impediments before we can help. Here are some examples of various types of accessibility and what modifications are usually needed:*



## WEB ACCESSIBILITY

**Text Alternatives:** Provide alt text for images so screen readers can describe them to visually impaired users.

**Subtitles & Captions:** Include video subtitles benefiting those with hearing impairments and non-native language speakers.

**Keyboard Navigation:** Ensure websites and apps can be navigated using just a keyboard, aiding users with motor impairments.



## COGNITIVE ACCESSIBILITY

**Simple Language:** Use clear, straightforward language and avoid jargon, aiding understanding for people with cognitive disabilities.

**Consistent Layout:** Maintain a predictable structure in digital and physical spaces to support users with cognitive and learning disabilities.

## PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY

**Ramps & Elevators:** Install ramps and elevators in buildings to ensure people who use wheelchairs or have mobility issues can access all areas.

**Braille Signage:** Use Braille alongside printed text on signs, for those who are blind or have low vision.



## SOCIAL ACCESSIBILITY

**Inclusive Events:** Offer diverse event formats (online, in-person with accommodations) and consider dietary, sensory, and physical needs in planning.

**Feedback Mechanisms:** Implement easy ways for users to provide feedback on accessibility, showing a commitment to continuous improvement.



# FOUNDATIONS OF FAIRNESS

## IT TAKES AN ORCHESTRA

From federal mandates that ensure that government digital services are inclusive to international guidelines that many organizations adopt to enhance usability for people with disabilities, let's explore some accessibility standards that are pivotal in shaping an accessible digital landscape.

Here are some of the specifics around each standard, including the legal requirements, compliance guidelines, and their applications:



### SECTION 508 OF THE REHABILITATION ACT

Section 508 mandates federal agencies to ensure their electronic and information technology (EIT) is accessible to people with disabilities, including employees and the public.

**Standards:** Aligned with WCAG 2.0, ensuring accessibility for text, images, forms, and sounds.

**Compliance:** Federal agencies must ensure all new and updated web content meets these guidelines.



### WEB CONTENT ACCESSIBILITY GUIDELINES (WCAG)

Developed by the W3C, WCAG guidelines are international standards for web accessibility referenced by Section 508 and the ADA.

**Levels of Compliance:** A (minimum), AA (standard for most federal agencies), AAA (highest).

**Details:** Recommendations cover accessibility for visual, auditory, physical, speech, cognitive, language, learning, and neurological disabilities.



### AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA)

The ADA includes digital accessibility under Title II (public entities) and Title III (public accommodations and commercial facilities).

**Application:** Websites and online services must be accessible to individuals with disabilities, often aligning with WCAG standards.



### 21ST CENTURY INTEGRATED DIGITAL EXPERIENCE ACT (IDEA)

Signed into law in 2018, this act improves the digital experience for government customers and reinforces accessibility standards.

**Requirements:** Federal websites must be modern, responsive, and accessible. Emphasis on standardized templates that support accessibility.



### TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACT SECTION 255

Requires telecommunications products and services to be accessible to people with disabilities.

**Application:** Ensures services can be communicated in accessible formats.





# INCLUSIVE PATHWAYS

Ensuring accessibility is part of corporate social responsibility. Yes, it is the law, but organizations demonstrate their commitment to equality and inclusion by proactively making their digital content accessible to all individuals, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities. Accessibility audits are a fantastic way to ensure this process is done effectively and that their digital offerings are more inclusive, successful, and compliant with legal standards.

## ACCESSIBILITY AUDIT

An accessibility audit evaluates physical spaces, digital products, and events to optimize participation for individuals with disabilities. For digital products, it involves comprehensive evaluations through automated testing, manual testing, and user testing with participants with disabilities. Here are some tips for developing accessible digital products.

Here are some tips anyone developing a digital product can incorporate to optimize accessibility:

### 1. KEYBOARD ACCESSIBILITY

**Keyboard-only navigation:** Ensure the product can be fully navigated using only the keyboard (Tab, Shift + Tab, Enter, Space) and all interactive elements are accessible.

**Focus visibility:** Provide a visible focus indicator to show the active element.

**Focus order:** Maintain a logical focus order that follows the webpage's visual order for predictable navigation.

### 3. VISUAL DESIGN & CONTENT

**Color contrast:** Ensure sufficient text and background contrast using tools like WebAIM Color Contrast Checker.

**Text resizing:** Verify text scales up to 200% without losing content or functionality.

**Images and multimedia:** Provide text alternatives (alt text, captions, descriptions) for all non-text content.

### 5. RESPONSIVE & MOBILE ACCESSIBILITY

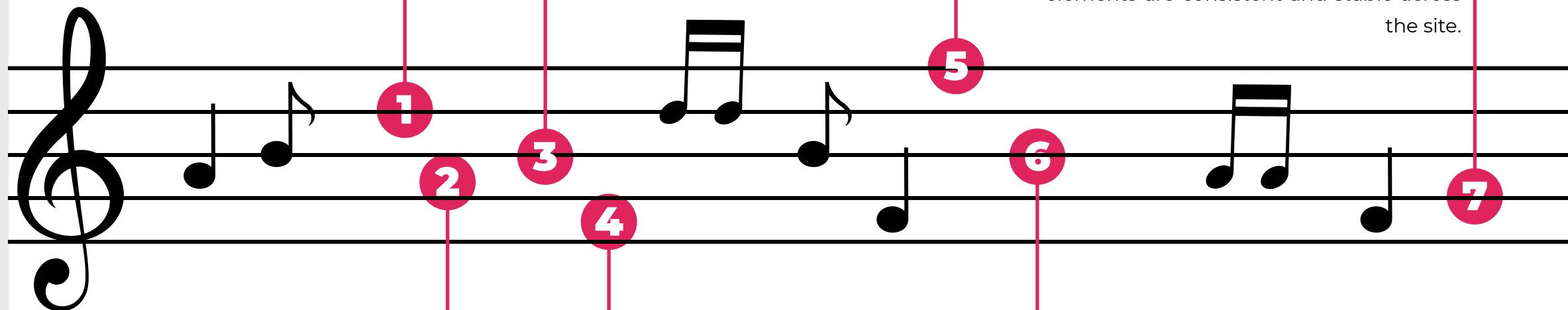
**Responsive testing:** Ensure accessibility across different devices and screen sizes.

**Touch targets:** Ensure touch targets (buttons, links) are at least 44x44 pixels for users with motor disabilities.

### 7. USER FLOWS & INTERACTIVE ELEMENTS

**Complex interactions:** Test modals, drop-downs, and sliders for keyboard and screen reader accessibility.

**Consistent navigation:** Ensure navigation elements are consistent and stable across the site.



### 2. SCREEN READER TESTING

**Compatibility:** Test with different screen readers (JAWS, NVDA, VoiceOver, TalkBack) for compatibility.

**Semantic HTML:** Ensure HTML elements are used correctly for accurate screen reader communication.

**ARIA roles and properties:** Verify ARIA roles and attributes convey information properly, especially for dynamic content and advanced controls.

### 4. FORMS & ERROR HANDLING

**Form labels:** Explicitly associate labels with form inputs for screen reader users.

**Error identification:** Clearly describe errors in text with instructions for fixing them, not relying solely on color.

### 6. MULTIMEDIA & DYNAMIC CONTENT

**Video and audio:** Ensure all multimedia has captions and transcripts, and that media players are accessible with stop, pause, and volume controls.

**Dynamic updates:** Use ARIA live regions to communicate content updates to assistive technologies.

# TECH-DRIVEN DIGITAL INCLUSION

Automated tools play a crucial role in accessibility audits for digital products by efficiently identifying various accessibility issues. While these tools cannot catch all accessibility issues, particularly those requiring human judgment, they are invaluable for spotting many common problems quickly. While these tools are essential for detecting and diagnosing various accessi-

bility issues, they are not a complete solution on their own. They should be used in conjunction with manual testing, expert review, and user testing to ensure comprehensive accessibility evaluations.

Here is a list of some common accessibility testing tools and a comprehensive understanding of what they help test for:

## **AXE ACCESSIBILITY**



Axe by Deque Systems, Inc is a powerful accessibility testing tool that is available as a browser extension for Chrome, Firefox, and Edge and as a JavaScript library that can be integrated into testing frameworks. It tests for compliance with standards like WCAG 2.1 and Section 508 and provides detailed issue descriptions along with suggestions for fixing them.



## **WAVE (WEB ACCESSIBILITY EVALUATION TOOL)**

WebAIM provides WAVE and is available both as a browser extension and a web-based service. It visually represents potential accessibility problems and features within the browser, highlighting issues directly on the page it evaluates.

## **GOOGLE LIGHTHOUSE**



Lighthouse is an open-source, automated tool developed by Google, built into Chrome DevTools. It audits performance, accessibility, progressive web apps, SEO, and more. The accessibility audit section checks for color contrast issues, aria attributes, names and labeling, and more to provide an overall accessibility score.



## **LEVEL ACCESS PLATFORM**

Level Access provides digital accessibility solutions through a unified software platform, expert support, and training. Their services include automated scans, manual testing, legal guidance, and compliance tools to help organizations embed accessibility into workflows and ensure inclusive digital experiences.



## **JAWS INSPECT**

JAWS Inspect simplifies accessibility and JAWS compatibility testing. It uses the same technology as the JAWS screen reader to provide an easily interpretable representation of the screen reader output. Features: It generates text output of JAWS commands, which can be used for faster auditing and quality control.



## **PALLY**

Pally is an open-source command-line interface tool that automates website accessibility testing. It runs tests against individual web pages or groups of pages and reports back on any accessibility issues found, which integrates into continuous integration pipelines.



## **POWERMAPPER (SORTSITE)**

PowerMapper is available as a desktop application or a web service. It tests websites for accessibility, broken links, HTML standards compliance, and more. It provides detailed reports of accessibility issues, including compliance with WCAG and Section 508.



## **SITEIMPROVE ACCESSIBILITY CHECKER**

Siteimprove offers a browser extension that provides insights into common accessibility issues on your web pages. It provides an easy-to-read report of issues that can affect end-user accessibility, complete with recommendations for corrections.



## **ACCESSIBILITY INSIGHTS**

Developed by Microsoft, *Accessibility Insights* is a browser extension for Chrome and Edge and a Windows application. It offers a range of tools, including automated checks and a guided manual testing process.



# EASIER CONVERSATIONS FOR EVERYONE

Conversations are essential in all contexts, whether 1:1 or in groups, especially in workplace collaboration. Here are some key concepts to increase the accessibility of your conversations. Keep in mind: You may never know who needs accessibility! Take it one step at a time; every little improvement

counts and adds up over time. Prioritize changes that will have the most impact or what you know how to do right now.

Here are some easy ways you can start practicing accessible communication:



## FACE THE LISTENER

1. Always face the person you are speaking to and maintain eye contact. Ensure your face is well-lit and free from shadows or backlighting. Both make it easier for those who rely on visual cues like lip-reading.
2. Speak at a moderate pace to allow listeners time to process the information. This is especially important in noisy settings or when communicating complex ideas.



## SUGGESTIONS FOR SPEAKING

1. Speak clearly and articulate your words fully to help everyone understand you better, including those with hearing impairments or processing disorders.
2. Use straightforward language and explain technical terms or acronyms to ensure everyone understands the discussion.
3. Regularly pause to invite questions and encourage feedback to ensure understanding, particularly from those needing additional clarification.



## TAKING IN THE ROOM

1. If someone needs help understanding something, try explaining it differently rather than simply repeating the same words.
2. Pay attention to visual cues that might indicate confusion or misunderstanding, and address these proactively.
3. Provide written summaries or follow-up materials for important discussions to help reinforce understanding, especially useful for those who may benefit from reviewing information at their own pace.



## USING VISUAL AIDS

1. Use visual supports like slides, drawings, or physical demonstrations to complement verbal explanations whenever possible.
2. Describe verbally the content of visual elements for those who might not see them clearly.
3. Ensure all visual aids are accessible, such as using large fonts and high-contrast colors for text and graphics.

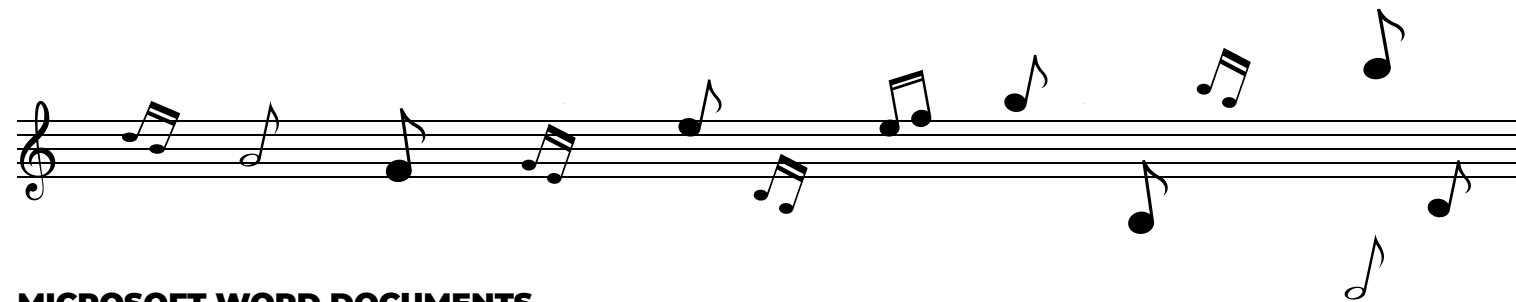
# DOCUMENTATION WITHOUT BARRIERS

## USING POPULAR INSTRUMENTS TO THEIR FULLEST POTENTIAL

This section provides detailed guidance on creating accessible documents using popular formats such as Microsoft Word, PDFs, and PowerPoint presentations. We will cover practical steps and tools for adding accessibility features to documents, from

using proper heading structures and accessible templates to implementing alt text for images and ensuring that color choices are perceivable by all.

Note these steps down to ensure your content is not only more inclusive but also more effective in reaching a diverse audience:



## MICROSOFT WORD DOCUMENTS

- 1. Use Built-in Heading Styles:** Apply heading styles (Heading 1, Heading 2) to organize content and facilitate navigation by screen readers.
- 2. Readable Fonts and Size:** To ensure readability, use clear fonts like Arial or Calibri, with a minimum size of 12pt for body text.
- 3. Alternative Text for Visuals:** Provide descriptive alt text for all images and charts to convey their purpose or content.
- 4. Simple Table Structures:** Utilize simple grid tables with clearly defined headers, and avoid splitting or merging cells unnecessarily.
- 5. Descriptive Hyperlinks:** Replace URLs with descriptive hyperlink text that indicates the link's destination, such as "Visit OpenAI homepage" instead of "click here."
- 6. Use Lists for Organization:** Employ bulleted or numbered lists using Word's formatting tools to maintain structure and clarity.
- 7. Check Accessibility:** Before finalizing the document, use Word's built-in Accessibility Checker to identify and fix accessibility issues.



## PDF DOCUMENTS

- 1. Start with an Accessible Source Document:** Ensure the original document (e.g., from Word) is accessible and has proper headings, alt text, and table structures.
- 2. Convert Using Accessibility Tools:** Use Adobe Acrobat or similar tools to convert documents to PDF while preserving accessibility features.
- 3. Include Tags in PDFs:** Ensure all content is tagged properly, including correct reading order and tagging of all images and tables.
- 4. Verify Document Language:** Set the document language in properties to aid correct pronunciation for screen readers.
- 5. Ensure Interactive Elements are Accessible:** Label form fields properly and set a logical tab order for interactive elements.
- 6. Run Accessibility Checks:** Use tools like Adobe Acrobat's Accessibility Checker to identify and resolve issues.
- 7. Provide Alternative Text:** Confirm that all images in the PDF have alternative text similar to the source document.

## POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS

- 1. Use Accessible Slide Layouts:** Stick to built-in slide layouts to ensure content is organized and readable by screen readers.
- 2. High-Contrast Color Schemes:** Use strong contrast between text and background colors for visibility.
- 3. Include Alt Text for All Images:** Add descriptive alt text to images, graphs, and charts.
- 4. Ensure Videos Have Captions:** Embed captions and subtitles in videos and provide transcripts for audio content.
- 5. Maintain Logical Reading Order:** Adjust the content's reading order in the Selection Pane to ensure it makes sense when read by assistive technologies.
- 6. Simplify Tables and Graphs:** Use straightforward designs for tables and graphs, with clear labels and descriptions.
- 7. Exporting Considerations:** When exporting to PDF or other formats, ensure that all accessibility features are preserved, including alt texts and logical reading orders.



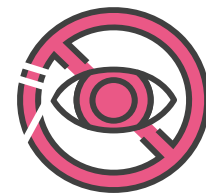
# MAKING EVERY MEETING COUNT

Accessible facilitation is about creating environments where everyone, regardless of ability or disability, can actively participate, contribute, and benefit. This section delves into the principles and practices of accessible facilitation, offering insights on how to design and conduct sessions that are not only effective but also universally accessible.

Can you remember when you intentionally set up a meeting this way? Use the following tips as a checklist when you are hosting or attending a meeting:



**Hosting Accessible Meetings:** Ensure remote meetings and events are accessible, providing guidelines and tools for effective participation.



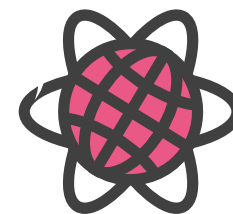
**Consider Visual Impairments:** Design documents and digital content to be accessible through screen readers for individuals with visual impairments.



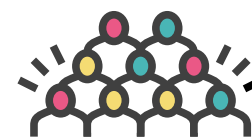
**Prepare for Document Accessibility:** Format documents for clarity and ease of understanding, using simple language, short sentences, and active voice to invite a broader audience.



**Use Personalized Communication:** Address people directly in a manner that is most accessible to them, using clear, concise language and meeting them where they are.



**Adjust the Narrative:** Emphasize the universal benefits of accessibility principles, showing how they enhance experiences for everyone, not just those with disabilities.



**Emphatic Vocal Support:** Expressing support and providing assistance can significantly impact individuals' ability to engage and participate.



# HYBRID FACILITATION

When ensuring accessible and inclusive hybrid meetings, it's helpful to consider structured actions before, during, and after the meeting. This clear narrative arc ensures that accessibility integrates into every phase of the meeting process.



## BEFORE THE MEETING

Preparation is crucial for accessibility in a hybrid setting:

- **Advance Communication:** Share agendas, slides, and notes in accessible formats well before the meeting to allow participants with disabilities to prepare.
- **Technology Check:** Ensure the technology supports accessibility, including screen reader compatibility, real-time captioning, and clear audio feeds.
- **Setup Guidelines:** Offer clear instructions and support for using the technology, especially for first-time or assistive users, and include troubleshooting tips.

By focusing on preparations before the meeting, proactive management during the event, and reflective actions afterward, you can create a more inclusive environment that accommodates all participants' needs, fostering more effective and equitable communication.



## DURING THE MEETING

Active facilitation and technology management enhance accessibility:

- **Clear Facilitation:** Use a structured approach. Introduce speakers and have them identify themselves.
- **Inclusive Interaction:** Ensure equal participation for remote and in-person attendees, pausing for questions and using a round-robin format.
- **Visual and Auditory Aids:** Describe visual content aloud and ensure all videos or multimedia have captions.
- **Real-Time Adjustments:** Monitor and adjust for accessibility issues like poor sound quality or insufficient response time.

**Additional resource:** Reusing and sharing this existing resource from the Employee Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN):

[Copy of Disability Inclusive Hybrid Work Model Policy Brief\\_752339359e.pdf](#)



## AFTER THE MEETING

Post-meeting actions ensure ongoing accessibility improvements:

- **Feedback Solicitation:** Ask participants for feedback on accessibility through follow-up emails or anonymous surveys.
- **Review and Iterate:** Review feedback and plan improvements for future meetings, such as updating technology, changing formats, or providing additional accessibility training.
- **Document and Share Learnings:** Summarize outcomes and feedback, and share these within the organization to raise awareness and improve practices.

# ENGAGE EFFECTIVELY

You don't have to be a facilitator, leader, or a meeting organizer to make meetings more accessible, especially hybrid meetings. Here are some actions any individual can take:

## TUNING YOUR INSTRUMENTS // PREPARATION AND SETUP

- **Identify Yourself:** State your name each time you speak to help remote attendees and those who cannot see you identify who is talking. Many transcripts do not automatically identify the speaker.
- **Position Your Camera Properly:** Ensure your face is well-lit and visible to assist participants who read lips or rely on facial expressions. Try to avoid back-lighting from windows.
- **Optimize Shared Content:** When sharing your screen, use a plain, high-contrast background and enlarge the text. Ensure that any visual content is clear and easily discernible.

## HARMONIZING THE ENSEMBLE // ENHANCING COMMUNICATION

- **Speak Clearly and Slowly:** Articulate clearly and maintain a moderate pace to aid live captioners and attendees who process information more slowly.
- **Describe Visual Content:** Provide verbal descriptions of all visual materials used during the meeting to assist attendees who are blind or have low vision.
- **Use Transition Statements:** Use transitions like “building on what [previous speaker] mentioned” to help participants, including those with cognitive disabilities, follow shifts in discussion topics.

## CONDUCTING A SYMPHONY // INTERACTION AND ENGAGEMENT

- **Repeat Before Responding:** Repeat questions and comments before responding to ensure all participants know the discussion context, especially those with auditory processing needs.
- **Prompt Equitable Participation:** Actively invite comments from both in-person and remote attendees. Rotate roles like note-taking or moderating to build empathy and inclusivity.
- **Provide Multiple Ways to Engage:** Use a range of various communication formats, such as spoken comments and chat. This allows all attendees to participate based on their needs.

## ADJUSTING THE ACOUSTICS // TECHNICAL SUPPORT AND FEEDBACK

- **Utilize Chat for Questions:** Leverage the meeting's chat feature to submit questions or highlight issues, which is helpful for those who prefer or can't speak up.
- **Check-in Regularly:** Periodically ask if everyone can hear and see the materials properly and adjust based on the feedback. If you're not speaking, you can use chat to check-in.
- **Annotations and Emphasizing Tools:** Use tools available within the meeting platform to highlight or draw attention to specific content parts, aiding understanding and engagement.

# WHY ACCESSIBILITY MATTERS

// with John Czajkowski  
and George Hoffmann

Moderated by Leila Rao



**Q** **Leila:** How did you end up at CMS?

**A** **John:** “HHS, where I had spent 20 years of my adult life, was the obvious choice when I returned to Federal Service. I deeply believe in what this department does, what it stands for, and what it’s made of.”

And from the day I came for my interview at CMS, this place has blown me away. I think that we have an impact far beyond the sum of our pieces, and it’s a testament to not just the passion that people have for the work but the excellence that people bring to it. As soon as I experienced CMS, I wanted to be part of it, and now I don’t want to be anywhere else.”

**Q** **Leila:** How did your DEI journey start?

**A** **John:** “I’ve always had a passion for DEI. I was vice chair of the NIH Diversity Council almost 25 years ago. This passion was largely a product of my personal experience. I grew up in Prince George’s County in the 1970s, when busing was very real. Many kids being bussed in were terrified; they didn’t know anyone there and could feel they weren’t always welcome.”

I’m a kid in elementary school watching this unfold. It taught me an important lesson about the old cliché of being the change you want to see. I wish I could say this came from some magical place, but it didn’t. It just came from seeing myself in

them, which set me on this course of consistently choosing peace and understanding over conflict.”

**Q** **Leila:** And how did your experience at the Perkins School impact you?

**A** **John:** “That was kind of rocket fuel for me because it highlighted a gap even in our diversity conversations, particularly concerning people with disabilities. Even though we do incorporate disability-related challenges, we often focus on mobility challenges but rarely on visual or auditory disabilities.”

My time at Perkins was transformative, exposing me to the lived experiences of people with visual disabilities. One major lesson was

that there is no single “blind experience”; every person’s journey is unique. The range of needs and opportunities varies greatly.

Another lesson was the interaction between sighted people and the visually impaired. A deaf-blind faculty member told me, “The problem isn’t us; it’s you,” which shifted my perspective profoundly.

I took ownership of my actions, asking, “What can I do to ensure my peers have as comparable a work experience as I have and the same opportunities for impact?” This experience and the resulting shift changed my DNA.”

**Q** **Leila:** Now, you are at CMS and in this role. While there may be a desire to do well, not everybody has had their DNA impacted. How can others learn from your experience?

**A** **John:** “It starts with the basics: You need to care and try. Accept that you don’t have it all

figured out; I make mistakes like anyone else. The key is humility—be willing to learn and sometimes be embarrassed in front of others.”

Next is to aim for fairness, which is fundamental but not always straightforward. We must consider what fairness means in each context. We have an obligation to be truth-tellers—sensitive, thoughtful, and considerate. We need to address issues, even when it’s uncomfortable for everyone involved.”

**Q** **Leila:** Why do you think we separate acceptability and fairness for the disabled community in a way that we don’t always with gender and race, for example?

**A** **John:** “There is something inherently uncomfortable for people without disabilities to be around people with disabilities, and they don’t know what to do or say. For some, this creates a personal fear. The fear of shame, failure, inadequacy, and being wrong is so powerful that people of-

ten quit before they fail.

When we encounter a blind person and don’t know what to do, we might walk away or pretend we don’t see them to avoid potential embarrassment. This fear of shame prevents learning and genuine interaction.”

**Q** **Leila:** How do you cultivate the idea of this learning journey?

**A** **John:** “I’ve been a guitar player since I was 14; I am 59 now. I still learn from 12-year-olds in a music store, or online, or anywhere else because every musician can teach me something. Everybody I know is better at something than I am, including 12-year-olds. The best version of myself lies down that road of being open to any learning that can come my way. When you start there, you open yourself up to learning.”

It isn’t about being brave or feeling like you have everything figured out. It’s about being fearless. If your definition of success is being the best version of yourself,



you can't get there if you're afraid to learn because you feel stupid. And so, we have to choose. Do we want to feel safe, or do we want to learn?"

**A George:** "What resonated with me is that I don't feel equipped entirely, but I have to do it anyway. I never would have said I'm fearless, but I don't mind the fact that I don't know something. I am curious, and I want to learn.

And realizing that I'm never going to stop learning because anytime you stop, the world continues to change. It's that willingness to accept that you're never going to know everything, but that doesn't change your desire to continue to acquire knowledge.

If I can do one thing or learn one thing better than I did yesterday, that's the goal. It's the willingness to continue and to work that creates progress."

**Q Leila: What has been one take-away from your experience**

**that everyone could benefit from?**

**A John:** "If there's one thing I learned working in the disabled community, it's how every person is who they are AS they are. Their needs are different and unique based on their physical selves. But they're not something less because of a disability. That's why Dr. Paul Farmer's quote, *"The idea that some lives matter less is the root of everything that's wrong with this world,"* means so much to me. Everyone has and is born with a value and dignity that no other human being can take from them. When you start with the notion that every person is complete in and of themselves, it's easy to do the rest."

**Q Leila: What are some of the barriers to creating a culture of accessibility?**

**A John:** "In many places, we struggle with the notion that progress is harder to achieve than it really is. The mind-

set of "I can't do everything, so I'm not going to do anything" is common. This isn't about malicious intent or laziness; it's genuine confusion because we often don't know how to be helpful. In our clumsiness, we withdraw because we feel uncomfortable and conspicuous. These kinds of behavior patterns are often a challenge."

**Q Leila: How do we overcome these barriers?**

**A John:** "Every great revolution was started by a handful of people willing to be labeled crazy, willing to do more than their fair share, and willing to be more resilient and durable than anyone should reasonably ask. They're eager to do all these things.

It's totally counter to my thinking as an employer. We don't ask our people to do unreasonable things, suffer, or be heroes. It would be best if you didn't have to be a hero to do your job.

Yet, change starts with someone willing to do more

than their fair share. That's what I try to do—stand up and take the heat by being the change I want to see.

To change people's minds and create something different, we must first be something different. We have to show up authentically. People only know what it looks like once they see an example. Be the change you want to see. It all starts there."

**A George:** The first follower is as important as the first person. Fostering that in people, to basically make the journey with you. What's your advice for someone who wants to be a change agent? How do they suddenly speak up where they usually wouldn't have said anything?

**A John:** "Conformity is a powerful instinct. Have you ever had someone whisper to you, and you instinctively whisper back? We conform automatically. It's a common way we learn...by imitating.

We can leverage this urge to

conform to be part of something bigger. That's why modeling behavior is vital. I don't see myself as a spiritual advisor or coach. I don't think of anyone as "they work for me." It's more that we work together as a team.

And in that context, modeling means fulfilling my role on the team.

This means doing my job well and paying attention to my behavior and language. I'm not perfect. I've had moments where I wish I could have phrased things differently, but I don't dwell on regret. I learn, move on, and keep improving.

Taking that approach to this DEI space, I believe in kindness, respect, dignity, patience, fairness, and forgiveness. Because everyone makes mistakes, and honest mistakes can be forgiven.

Show up in a way that enables the team to do its best work. My role is to help everyone be their best, do their best work, and have the best work experience possible. There are things I can't solve,

but I can consciously do all I can to ensure everyone has a comparable opportunity to be their best selves.

**Q Leila: You're recasting leadership as a partnership and teamwork. With that intent, what is your ask for all the employees of this agency? How can they be good teammates on this journey?**

**A John:** "I ask everyone to be self-accountable for the impact they have. Own your decisions and personal growth, and remain self-aware. Start with what you can do, where you are, with what you have. Everyone can contribute something, even if it's not everything.

What matters to me is what George just said. I can see you're trying to show up and be true to this. That's really all I'm looking for. I want to be with people I care about and respect who say we could do some cool stuff together. Let's go do that."



# FACING FEARS TOGETHER

Making accessibility real can feel overwhelming at times. It's not just about following rules—it's about understanding and respecting the experiences of others who might not interact with the world like we do. Here's a look at some emotional hurdles we might face along the way and how we can overcome them together:



## FEAR OF MAKING MISTAKES

We all worry about hitting the wrong note. Fear of making mistakes can turn us into bystanders, but we must not be paralyzed. Let us educate ourselves! Many resources, including this ebook, can help you learn about accessibility. Give yourself and others grace; mistakes will happen. What's important is that we try and learn together.



## FEELING OVERWHELMED

The task of creating harmony can seem challenging, and the scope of what needs to be done to make our work accessible can be daunting. The key is to start somewhere and take it one step at a time. Every little improvement counts and adds up over time. Prioritize changes that have the most impact or what you know how to do right now.



## LACK OF PERSONAL CONNECTION

If we haven't played certain instruments, it might be hard to see why specific adjustments are crucial. Remember, you never know who may need these changes—anyone could benefit, even you in the future. Get to know those directly affected by listening to their experiences. It can change your perspective and motivate you to make meaningful improvements.



## CONCERNS ABOUT AESTHETICS

For those who take pride in realizing a specific vision, or symphony, accessibility might seem like it could compromise aesthetics or functionality. This is a myth. Look for examples of beautiful, accessible designs. When done right, accessibility can enhance both functionality and style. Remember, constraints can inspire greater creativity and innovation.



## RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Picking up a new instrument is hard. It disrupts what we're used to, and sometimes it can feel unnecessary, especially if things seem fine the way they are. The best way to help yourself overcome this is to re-focus on the benefits. Accessibility isn't just about compliance; it's about making things better for everyone. It can lead to more innovation and a broader audience for our services or products.



## DEFENSIVENESS AND DENIAL

When the conductor comes at you with criticism, it's natural to get defensive. What can we do? View feedback as a path to improvement. In our orchestra, we're all learning, and every piece of feedback is a chance to play better together.

We can create environments that welcome everyone by facing these challenges openly and working through them with empathy and determination. It's about building a world where inclusivity is woven into the fabric of everything we do. Let's keep learning, adapting, and growing together.





## **REPRISE**

**Accessibility removes barriers for full participation by people with disabilities, ensuring universal access to opportunities. It involves designing inclusive products and environments and is essential in DEIA to create spaces that allow effective interaction for everyone. This ebook shares practical strategies for universal design and celebrates diversity in the community.**

**[DEI at OIT Volume 1: Overview](#)**

**[DEI at OIT Volume 2: Allyship](#)**

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