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VISIONS Case Study

informed decisions with data requires people who understand the data. In addition to analysis, nonprofits need easy access to the expertise of our communities. That lived knowledge helps us tell the difference between statistical inaccuracies and transformative truth. In this case study, we explore how one nonprofit – VISIONS, which serves the blind and visually impaired – keeps the needs of its community firmly at the center. For the blind and visually impaired community, those needs include visual accessibility.

Unfortunately, the nonprofit sector does not typically prioritize accessibility. Websites, software, and forms usually are designed by able people who do not understand how to ensure access to all. In doing so, we render entire communities invisible and deny our organizations critical expertise.

Accurate, effective, and equitable nonprofit data use requires taking an accessibility-first approach. As a happy side effect, addressing accessibility makes the world an easier place for everyone. Most people we serve could benefit from an easier-to-navigate world.

About VISIONS

VISIONS/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired is a nonprofit rehabilitation and social service organization. VISIONS' purpose is to develop and implement individualized programs to assist people who are blind and visually impaired of all ages to lead independent and active lives and to educate the public to understand their capabilities and needs.

Employ Staff Reflecting Your Community

We had an opportunity to talk to Ruben Coellar, one of the Chief Program Officers at VISIONS. He explained that hiring people who are blind or have a visual impairment has been a focus of the organization for over 30 years. This effort makes VISIONS unusual among social services organizations — the staff reflects the community it serves. One-third of staff are blind or have a visual impairment. That ratio remains in the management of the organization.

This gives VISIONS an unmistakable mandate to consider accessibility in their technology systems. As Khaled Musa, Director of Technology Services at VISIONS, explained: "at the end of the day, these are real people, doing real work, that are interacting day to day with technology that they need to work with independently."

It's important to remember that disabilities are nuanced and complex. For example, being blind or visually impaired is a spectrum of experiences ranging from the obvious to the invisible. The same is true for neurodiverse people, people with mobility impairments, and people struggling with mental health. Your organization almost certainly already has some of this expertise — people with invisible disabilities who are making it work. Creating space for conversations about accessibility will help these people feel safe enough to come out and contribute their expertise.

Organizations as a whole benefit from this work. Making your workplace and technology accessible for your staff has trickle-down effects for your services. And hiring people with the lived experience of disability gives your organization built-in expertise to navigate the needs of your community.

Don't Trust, Test

The VISIONS team also helped us understand how to select software tools and vendors that are accessible. Unfortunately, we learned that you usually cannot trust vendors' accessibility claims. It's easier to add a few lines to marketing materials than to design your systems from the beginning with accessibility in mind. The only way to know is to test.

VISIONS does this by ensuring blind and visually impaired people are on the committee selecting every software tool. After vendors are shortlisted, these individuals will test each piece of software by running through every main use case. Thorough testing is essential because vendors often make small portions of their tools accessible (e.g., interfaces for the entry-level staff or just a website's main pages). In addition, vendors often make ableist assumptions about what parts of their systems would benefit from accessibility.

Khuloud explained that multiple people must test because everyone has their own way of working. People use different tools (screen readers vs. magnifiers) and use those tools in different ways. The software must work with a variety of disabilities and accessibility tools.

Consider Your Vendors' Culture

Testing software for accessibility is important but often not enough. If vendors don't center accessibility, issues will likely arise in the future – after you've invested. As Khaled explained, "We've had cases where you sign up for a product which is accessible for current needs, an update is released, and accessibility gets screwed up because it was a major update, and they did not consider accessibility. Or some might fix a ticket, but it breaks accessibility. They tried to get it out the door quickly and wanted to clean it up later."

Vendors need to consider accessibility a priority for themselves and any third-party tools they work into their software. Khaled suggests asking, "Do you have people dedicated to this? Do you train your staff? Do you do your research? Do you consider sub-vendors for accessibility? In short, do you have the same commitment to accessibility that we do?" Vendors should have the attitude, training, staff, and processes to ensure that accessibility doesn't get forgotten in favor of expediency.

VISIONS shows us that equitable technology use in the nonprofit sector isn't a matter of specific tools or techniques. What matters is involving the people most impacted in the decision. Designing with and testing by community members drives success.