

6 Ways to Make Digital Services More Accessible

Digital services can transform the way people interact with government. Instead of waiting in a long line to update a driver's license, get a building permit, or access government benefits, those activities can happen online. But for digital services to be truly revolutionary, they must be accessible to everyone.

Accessibility can mean a lot of things: providing tools to aid those with disabilities, using inclusive language, and making sure that broadband access is available to all, for example. In a [recent GovLoop event](#), experts from government and industry explored strategies for making digital services more accessible.



#1 Consider the user

For digital services to be truly available, they must meet the actual user need. That may sound intuitive, but it can require some finesse. At the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, for example, Digital Service Expert and Advisor Mathias Rehtzigel took a look at how screen readers interpreted the National Suicide Lifeline (9-8-8) phone number as the tools read aloud for visually impaired users.

“We identified that for screen-reader users, 9-8-8 was announcing as *nine hundred and eight-eight* — which might not sound like a big problem,” he said. But consider context. “This sentence might be: *If you need help, leverage these nine hundred and eight-eight resources.*” That’s not helpful.

By fine-tuning outputs like that, agencies can ensure their digital services are actually hitting the mark for their intended recipients.



#2 Identity = access

In order to have full and open access to government's digital services, people must be able to identify themselves online easily and consistently. To ensure that everyone can utilize the needed credentials — including, for example, unhoused individuals, who might not have access to common forms of identification — the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) provides a digital ID card.

With those identities in hand, “we take our tablets and mobile technology out in the field, to these vulnerable people and communities who don’t necessarily have access to broadband or internet,” as well as those experiencing cognitive or physical challenges, said Serenity Thompson, the DMV’s Deputy Director for Digital Service.

The ready availability of a common digital ID unlocks those services for a wide range of users who otherwise might not have access.





#3 Leverage continuous feedback

End users' needs are a moving target. In order to ensure that services are truly available to all, it's important that government track how those services are used, said ServiceNow Federal CTO Jonathan Alboum.

"Conditions change," he said. "People who haven't had disabilities will find themselves with a disability, and they'll need help. We have to continue to make things easier, and more accessible."

At the California DMV, analytics plays a key role in tracking digital engagements. "We have two teams within DMV who own those functions," Thompson said. "One is under my group, and one is under the office of the chief data officer. We're monitoring customer experience in their own words, we're reading that feedback every day, and we're measured: Performance is evaluated based on those scores."



#4 Sensitize the workforce

In order for government's digital services to be fully accessible, the individuals behind those services need to be highly aware of circumstances that are perhaps outside their usual understanding.

"A lot of folks don't even know that Alt Text exists," Rechtzigel said, referring to a tool that conveys information about an image as it relates to the content of a document or webpage. "Making the invisible visible is a big challenge."

To generate buy-in, explain the *why* behind accessibility. "It's all about creating a better world for people, making sure that the technology isn't a barrier for the care that they need or the education that they're striving for," he said.



#5 Go beyond compliance

Government needs to look beyond doing the bare minimum.

Certainly, it's important for government, and its industry partners, to understand regulatory requirements. "Whether you're a vendor building a system for an agency, a software provider creating products that the government might use, if you're not aware that these are requirements...chances are that you're going to end up creating something that's insufficient, that doesn't create that inclusivity," Alboum said.

But the panelists agreed that this is just the starting point. Merely focusing on the statutory obligations when it comes to accessibility isn't enough. "Compliance is the floor," Rechtzigel said. "We could always do better."



#6 Look to build trust

Digital services aren't an end in themselves. As the primary touch point between constituents and government, they can be a powerful mechanism for building (or breaking) trust.

"If there's a service I need from government and I can't use it — maybe it's too hard to use, or it's not accessible to somebody with a particular kind of disability — I'm not really going to have a very favorable impression of government," Alboum said.

"Trust in government is at an all-time low," he said. "If we're reaching more people with these great experiences, more people will be feeling better about government. Bit by bit, that's how we change the way people perceive and interact with government."