

3Play Webinars | Championing Inclusivity with the GAAD Foundation

KELLY MAHONEY: Thank you, everyone, for joining us for today's session on Championing Inclusivity with the GAAD Foundation. My name is Kelly. I'm on the marketing team here at 3Play, and I'll be moderating today's session. I'm a young white woman with long, reddish brown hair. I'm wearing a white shirt and some pink dangly earrings today.

With that being said, I'd like to welcome today's speakers, Joe Devon and Jennison Asuncion, founders of Global Accessibility Awareness Day, and the GAAD Foundation. We're excited to pick their brains about all things accessibility today. So thank you both for joining us, Joe and Jennison.

JOE DEVON: Thank you, Kelly.

JENNISON ASUNCION: Thank you so much. And happy Giving Tuesday, everyone.

JOE DEVON: Yeah.

KELLY MAHONEY: Happy Giving Tuesday. So I intentionally kept your introductions pretty brief because I'd like each of you to introduce yourselves, and give us a brief overview of your backgrounds, and how you got to where you are today. So how about, Jennison, do you want to start us off?

JENNISON ASUNCION: Sure. I was going to say, Joe, we should like introduce each other. But hey, everyone. I'm Jennison Asuncion. I live out here in San Jose, California, but originally I hail from Canada. In terms of my accessibility journey, I've been working in the field of digital accessibility since 2006. And part of what's always fascinated me about the work is figuring out different ways to get mainstream technologists, everyday technologists, interested in accessibility.

So I got wind of the idea of accessibility camps, and started one up in Toronto. And then started one out here when I came out to the Bay Area. But it was always about bringing people together, giving them some free food, and just having fun talking about accessibility. And then suddenly out of nowhere, I came upon a blog post by my esteemed friend, Joe, who will talk about the blog post himself, but talking about making this a global effort and spreading the good word about accessibility more globally.

And so here we are going into our-- well, we're in our 13th year this year of Global Accessibility Awareness Day. So I'll stop there for now.

JOE DEVON: Thanks for the nice lead-in, Jennison. Because I came from the other side of it where at the time I was a developer working on AmericanIdol.com. I had heard about screen readers, accessibility here and there. But when I saw a demo of a screen reader, that just blew me away, just as a technologist. And I realized that I was always on the bleeding edge of tech. And here was a technology that was super cool, solved a big problem, and I had no idea that it existed.

So I knew that my fellow developers had no concept of it. And some years passed, and then my dad was in his mid-80s, and he really struggled with his banking. It took him a full day to get to the bank. Using it online was a mediocre experience. And then he got phished, and got an email after that from the bank and was unable to read it because the bank's website was inaccessible. And that upset me because if you cannot bank, you cannot be independent.

And my dad spoke 11 languages, including Aramaic. And to see a brilliant man like my dad not be able to bank, that was just unacceptable. So I wrote this blog post proposing to create this Global Accessibility Awareness Day. And as I wrote it, I was positive this was going to really work. This is a great idea. And then I hit send, and I was like, this is never going to happen, no way. And to my utter shock, Jennison read the post and he's like, why don't we have a little chat?

And we had a chat, and I had been building community in Los Angeles. So I knew the power of community. But this was a whole other level. So Jennison had his own community within the accessibility space. And the two of us worked together and turned this into a viral event, which is why we're here. And for me, I'm super excited because I'm a big fan of 3Play. They do amazing work. And having them invite me and Jennison to speak is a really wonderful experience. So I will end on that note.

KELLY MAHONEY: That was a great overview. I also just wanted to throw in there that Global Accessibility Awareness Day next year is May 16, just for anyone who is unfamiliar with the day as of yet. Joe, that was a great lead-in, the story about your dad, to my next question. How have your backgrounds influenced your commitment to making technology more inclusive? Were there more personal experiences or encounters that you had that influenced you to do what you're doing now?

JOE DEVON: Actually, on American Idol, the year that I was there, Scott McIntyre was a blind contestant, the first one to get into the top 24. I think he ended number 8 on American Idol. He was a fantastic singer. I got to meet him and his family personally. And it was just early on in my accessibility journey, but that was pretty cool. But other than that, it was really just my dad and knowing that we had a responsibility.

We were reaching millions of people. And just on American Idol, they used to say that more people voted for American Idol than for the President of the United States. So it's a big responsibility when your work is affecting that many people. So I knew it was important.

JENNISON ASUNCION: As for myself, I am someone who benefits from accessibility. I became blind when I was about a year and a half old. But beyond that, in my teens, I participated in a program which was run by the CNIB back in Canada, which brought 24 blind and visually impaired youth together. For many of them, that was the first time they had access to things like screen readers, Braille displays, screen enlargement software. And for me, just stepping back and witnessing that, I had already had access to all of that technology.

But to see the power of putting that technology in the hands of people who hadn't had it before had a profound impact on me. I didn't quite back then that it was going to lead to where I am today. But I got to see the power of when you put technology in the hands of people with disabilities and technology that works for them, what could be possible. That was that.

And then I ended up going through school, volunteering to teach computers and things like that to people with a variety of different disabilities, not just people who are blind or visually impaired. And I just kept growing that and then growing my awareness of disabilities in general through student politics.

And then fast forward to jumping into digital accessibility full time myself, again in 2006, everything coming full circle at that point and melding both my personal interests and just the, quote-unquote, "calling" that some of us are lucky enough to get at some point in our career.

KELLY MAHONEY: That's great. Thank you both for sharing a little bit about your backgrounds and your personal experiences. I'm sure people in our audience can relate to that feeling as well. In fact, Jenna just sent a message in the chat that her daughter was the person who influenced her towards thinking about accessibility.

Like I said, I'm glad that we've learned more about your individual journeys. And you began to tease a little bit about how GAAD started. So Joe, could you tell us a little bit more about what happened after the blog post, after Jennison caught wind of it, and how you sort of solidified that movement?

JOE DEVON: It's interesting. Because usually when I write something down, even a tweet, and then I look back on it a day later, a month later, or six months later, I just hate it. The same thing with code, just very critical of anything I put down. And it took me some years to revisit that blog post. And actually, I have no issue with it whatsoever. Everything in that blog post came true really as it was stated.

And in there it was about connecting up with communities, trying to get meetups involved, reaching out to journalists, and letting them know that this is an important cause for them to actually write about. And all of that happened. But there's no way this would have gone viral without Jennison. Being perfectly frank, Jennison I'd say in the first year, he got the word out to everybody in the accessibility community. But I also have to call out the community, because you can have great vision, great idea, but if you don't have a community to pick up on it, you will go nowhere.

And so Jennison made the call to all of these people. And they all took upon themselves to do events. We had 16. We were in 16 different cities in the very first year. We got a whole bunch of press in the very first year.

And then the second year, I think Jennison reached out a little bit, and that was it. Then it was a train that we were just trying to follow and hold onto rather than really direct too much. There's just a few things we got to pay attention to. But other than that, we're just following the community.

JENNISON ASUNCION: Just to add to what Joe said, and I love telling this story because this really shouldn't have happened the way it did. Because Joe published the story on a Saturday. And typically on Saturdays, I'm out and about. And it just happened to be that I was at home that night, just checking out Twitter. And it all just happened so by chance. I shouldn't have seen that tweet that Joe's service.

Joe, correct me if I'm wrong. But you didn't actually send that tweet. It got automatically, it got--

JOE DEVON: No. WordPress did it. WordPress did it automatically.

JENNISON ASUNCION: It got automatically sent out. So this was all just such a--

JOE DEVON: Fate.

JENNISON ASUNCION: Yeah. It was so interesting the way that it happened. And I'll say jokingly, we literally chose a date. What was it? May 12th, the first year? And we just--

JOE DEVON: It was May 9th.

JENNISON Yeah, we just said like, hey, well, what day? Now, we've standardized it now to be the third Thursday of May. And
ASUNCION: if you go to Accessibility.day on the web, you can read more about it. But by standardizing it on the third Thursday of May, it's more a reminder for Joe and I. Frankly, it's helpful to us to just know that it's always going to be on that day, GAAD.

JOE DEVON: I'll actually add to that. There's another reason I think it's important. There is the public side that everybody sees. And I think that's about half of what goes on. Because there is as much activity in corporations that have accessibility departments, and internally they do events. So I think that Jennison and I probably split our speaking to half public, half private events. And for them to have that planning in advance is really important. So they know, OK, it's the third Thursday. They can put it into their marketing calendars, into their internal planning, training calendars, and that is really helpful.

JENNISON And it's also neat that, as Joe said, sometimes we only find out after the fact that company x or organization y
ASUNCION: has done something for GAAD. Some tell us, and they're like, but we just wanted to let you know. We didn't want to make it public, which is fine, because some companies, frankly, are just starting their journey on digital accessibility and digital inclusion. And they just want to keep it a little hushed while they're still building their culture around accessibility. And that's perfectly fine.

And the other thing is some people celebrate the day. Some people celebrate a week. Some celebrate it for a month. At this point, people come to Joe and I and ask, what's the theme for this year? At this point, while we've never had a, quote-unquote, "theme" for GAAD except some aspect of digital access or digital inclusion. But we've really just made it a platform for people to leverage for their best efforts, whether it's the marketing internally around the importance of accessibility, they wanted to trumpet a new product or feature that to the public that they want to do, or if they want to just get some of their leaders in accessibility out in the community, or just have conversations amongst colleagues around accessibility.

So people just, at this point, run with it. We just ask that it stays focused on digital access and digital inclusion. And other than that, sky's the limit.

KELLY I guess we should count ourselves lucky that Joe's WordPress was acting up and Jennison decided to have a night
MAHONEY: in that day.

JENNISON Yes, exactly.
ASUNCION:

KELLY I'm glad you both are starting to talk about how things have grown, because that's what I wanted to ask you
MAHONEY: about. How have you seen this grow and evolve over the years, or what would you say are some of the biggest differences from when it started to how people celebrate now?

JENNISON Well, I'll start this one off, because I am always excited to hear when we hear from an organization who's told us
ASUNCION: that they are celebrating GAAD in a language other than English. Obviously, Joe and I are first language English speakers. Joe speaks a number of other languages. But the reality is there's a reason why there's a Capital G in Global Accessibility Awareness Day, is because we need to reach out around the world in languages that people speak. And technology is being developed in all sorts of different languages.

And so I'd say we're seeing a lot more celebrations of GAAD in other languages is where I am most proud of spreading that word. I don't know. What about you, Joe? What are you--

JOE DEVON: There's so much. I remember in the first years, the first big aha moment was when the bank that inspired writing the post that I never mentioned their name publicly, they don't even know that they inspired it. They wrote us by the third year that they were doing an event internally. But it was still very early days.

And I remember the first big keynote that I ever gave, I mentioned the word accessibility. And there were some people in the audience that heard of the term. And I was already taken aback because I hadn't run into developers that heard of it. And now I'd say everybody has pretty much heard of it, which is a big improvement and really important because we want to change the culture of digital product development. And you can't do that if there's no awareness.

And again, I mean it's in the name, Global Accessibility Awareness Day. So I'd say we've come a long way in terms of the awareness. But we started the GAAD foundation in order to grow. Or really we have a mission to change that culture. And we wanted to make that an everyday thing and go from beyond awareness to action. And that is where we're starting to see some differences. We're starting to see lots of companies create products for accessibility. We're seeing Super Bowl commercials, which certainly was something that I don't think we could have dreamed of on the day itself. And on the week we've seen some prime time. I mean it's just great to see that kind of engagement.

KELLY MAHONEY: Yeah, it's really amazing, I mean how quickly GAAD took off after it started. And again, I'm glad you mentioned the GAAD Foundation. Are there other specific events or campaigns, whether related to the foundation or not necessarily, that individuals can participate in to contribute to accessibility and inclusivity, or just get involved with GAAD?

JENNISON ASUNCION: Absolutely. I'll take this one. So just to step back for a little bit on the foundation itself, when we approached our 10th GAAD, Joe and I figured we had to do something interesting and different. And so we'd always heard from people that, hey, it's great to have GAAD on this single day. But accessibility is something that needs to be done year round.

Now, what people may or may not know about Joe and I, is we do have day jobs. So this is like a really an act of love for both of us at this point. And so we started the foundation. And as Joe said, the mission is to disrupt the culture of technology and digital product development so that accessibility becomes a core requirement. And so GAAD is part of that work.

But then we have three other programs within the foundation. One of which is called the GAAD Speakers Fund where we provide financial support to three groups of people. One are everyday technologists who want to present on an accessibility topic at an accessibility-related event, such as the CSUN Assistive Technology Conference, as an example.

The other is accessibility professionals who want to present at a mainstream tech event, such as a South by Southwest or something large. The third group are people with different disabilities or impairments who want to present on an accessibility topic at either venue. Because part of it is increasing the conversation. So we provide funding up to US dollars, to allow speakers to elevate the conversation on accessibility. And this year, so we had conversations at conferences in Philadelphia, in Berlin, and in Brisbane, Australia. All three of those were mainstream conferences where accessibility was talked about. So we're pretty proud of that.

So certainly next year, we will have more of the speakers fund availability. So think about that if you're a speaker and need that kind of financial support. Something else I'll ask Joe to talk about is the GAAD pledge.

JOE DEVON:

Yeah, so the pledge is really getting open source frameworks to go along with this mission of ours where they make accessibility a core value of their project. And right in the very first year, we really want to get very influential projects. Because developers, they follow the frameworks that are out there and these open source projects. And if you want to get at the culture. You really have to hit these open source projects.

And right from the very first year, Facebook, now it's called Meta, they took the pledge for React Native, which is very high profile. Then the second year Ember.js took the pledge. The third year Drupal took the pledge. And then this year, it was obvious that it had to be an AI project, and Intel has been very supportive of us. And they took the pledge for OpenFL which is a federated learning project. And the way it works is it's a deep learning framework that allows organizations to train their models locally.

So just to give you an idea, if you're in a hospital you have HIPAA considerations and privacy considerations. You don't want to send your data to a central location and expose that data. And we thought that for accessibility, it's really important to respect people's privacy. And so it was wonderful to see this project that allowed distributed training of machine learning models. They also included Intel's new accessible monospace font, and that was developed with input from legally blind and low vision developers to make a really legible font. And so that was part of the pledge as well.

And we're excited. This is something else where you can help if you're involved in an open source project. We haven't decided on next year's GAAD pledge. So feel free to propose your favorite framework and reach out to people that are running that group.

JENNISON

ASUNCION:

And then most recently, last month, no still this month, I'm jumping ahead there. We held our first Gaadys celebration. And shout out to our executive secretary, Mindy Morgan, who really drove this particular initiative. And it's an annual event. We ran our first one this year. And it's an opportunity to basically step back and recognize work that's been done to organizations and companies that are living and breathing the mission and vision of our foundation, that are making accessibility a first class citizen.

So this year we honored Equalize Digital for their Accessibility Checker for WordPress, Unilever and Zappar for their QR code, and Studio 24 for their W3C redesign of the W3C website. And each of those projects integrated accessibility from the get go, and involve people with disabilities. And we want that to be an everyday thing. So next year certainly another way for people to get involved is to nominate your own digital product or technology, or nominate someone else's. We'll be updating the information on the site in the coming months.

But certainly, this is going to be another annual event that we hope will become as viral as GAAD itself. I'm not sure, Joe, if you wanted to say anything else about the Gaadys from your perspective.

JOE DEVON: No. I just we'd love to see more people getting involved and building assistive technology, or just actually making accessibility part of their regular technology. So it's an exciting one for us.

JENNISON And we never, again similar to GAAD itself, we were like, well we'll put this out there and see what people think.

ASUNCION: And we'll see if we get nominations and such. And it was so tough for us. We ended up getting 18 nominations this year. All of them, all of them were solid. But it's always tough. We have limited funding and availability and such like that. So we had to narrow it down to three winners this year.

But certainly, an opportunity is there to do it. And again it's all about raising awareness, raising the visibility of accessibility. And it's we're trying to do this beyond the digital accessibility community and the community of people with disabilities. We want everyday tech professionals wherever they are to be thinking about accessibility. Because after a while, you keep preaching to the choir, and that's certainly not where Joe and I are when it comes to the work that we're trying to achieve with both the foundation and with GAAD.

And I think people appreciate and understand that. If we all just have the same people around the table, that's all we have is the same people around the table. But we need to reach out beyond and get all sorts of people from every development shop, every design shop, startups, all kinds of different people thinking about accessibility.

JOE DEVON: I'm going to add one more thing before you go, Kelly, which is that 3Play Media was our captioning sponsor for the Gaadys, so thank you for that.

JENNISON And--

ASUNCION:

KELLY Yes.

MAHONEY:

JENNISON And 3Play Media came through for us when we decided this year to release a rap for GAAD. And 3play came in and helped us caption that. It's called Accessibility Days, a big shout out to our performers, Coop and to Adam, who is a colleague of mine at LinkedIn. And it's just, again, part of it is also just having fun with it and just expanding how we reach out to people around accessibility.

Because it's one thing to talk about it, and we certainly do an awful lot of that. But how neat is it that we now have a rap that people can download and use that as part of their playlist for the day? And we have some--

JOE DEVON: The first thought, I would do a rap.

JENNISON I know, right?

ASUNCION:

JOE DEVON: Jennison. That's pretty fun.

JENNISON Yeah, absolutely.

ASUNCION:

KELLY Yeah, and making it fun is definitely important. I a couple of years ago at this point, 3Play did a parody of
MAHONEY: Pharrell's "Happy" with the words you guys need captions. That was the tune. We also have Diane in the chat, curious about what a Gaadys award looks like. So maybe that's your way to incentivize more accessibility initiatives. And we also did get one question about the GAAD pledge from Zach. Can universities take this pledge as well? I know you mentioned a couple corporations.

JOE DEVON: So in terms of the GAAD pledge, we're looking for open source projects as opposed to it's not like the corporation is the thing. It's that Meta was the one in charge of the React Native project. So they were the ones that took the pledge, because they controlled it. But it's not so much about corporation versus university. It's more about whoever the core developers are in the open source project.

KELLY Great. Thank you.

MAHONEY:

JOE DEVON: And I'm looking for a picture of the Gaadys which I'll put on the chat if I find it.

KELLY Yes. Thank you.

MAHONEY:

JENNISON By the way, if I can-- sorry.

ASUNCION:

KELLY That's OK. Go right ahead.

MAHONEY:

JENNISON Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I was like I didn't mention Adam's last name. Adam Wolkov so I just wanted to give a shout out
ASUNCION: to Adam and Lil Coop for just taking on this rap, writing a rap around accessibility, and making that happen for us.

KELLY Yeah, it's incredible how GAAD has grown to a globally recognized initiative. But also has all these little offshoots
MAHONEY: like you're saying, making accessibility fun. And I think looking back at the past and things that GAAD has already done naturally makes us think about the future and how it will continue to evolve. So I'd like to pick your brains next on where you both think the future of digital accessibility and inclusion might be headed.

As we look to 2024, I'm sure everybody has been months deep in planning for 2024 at this point. From both of your perspectives, are there new technologies or trends in the digital accessibility community that you're most excited about next year?

JENNISON Joe, why don't you take this one?

ASUNCION:

JOE DEVON: Sure. I mean every panel has to talk about AI at some point. And it's definitely impacting industry after industry. And I'll just give you a simple example. When I'm doing any kind of social media post and I want to do an Alt text now, my first go to is I upload the image to ChatGPT, and ask it for an Alt description. And it's almost always right on the money. I don't even need to think about what goes in there. Because it's usually really right there.

Obviously, this is going to turn into the tooling where there will be an automated either on the client side or on the server side, where there will be an automated Alt text for all images. This is controversial. There's definitely some things that are going to have to be worked out. And personally I think that we need to get people that use Alt text to weigh in on how they prefer it to be used. But I personally think that most people would prefer to have it done a certain way.

I don't think that everybody universally wants to see their Alt text in the identical way. And what's interesting about prompting these LLMs, the large language models, is that you can ask it to be very verbose or to be very light in how it's describing it to you. And I think that there's going to be lots of personalization when it comes to AI. And right now I'm only talking about Alt text. But it impacts so many different aspects of technology because some of you may have heard of Be My AI. Some of you might be users of Be My AI. And anybody that I know that has used it has said that it's really been transformative for them.

So assistive technology, there's going to be new technologies. There is going to be hopefully developers that are going to learn about accessibility better through these technologies. But they're not there yet. Frankly, they're spitting out inaccessible code for the most part. Even if you ask it for accessible code, it's been so-so. But I expect in maybe a year or two that will improve considerably, maybe two years.

**JENNISON
ASUNCION:**

I would say also AI is being explored for use for test automation. One of the challenges, of course, with today's test automation, depending who you speak to, is that it only can catch somewhere between 30% to 50%. Again, depending on who you speak to of accessibility issues. And a lot of those are the low hanging fruit. But some of the larger issues, like keyboard operability, navigability, and things like that are still not yet at a point where you could automate them.

And then another example is a number of the new Web Content Accessibility Guidelines from version 2.2 at the double-A level, some of those as of yet cannot be fully automated or automated at all. But we're hoping that all the smarter people in the room who are looking at how to use AI and computer vision to really help make some of these bigger accessibility issues, help out in an automated way.

Now, that's never to take away from the need for manual testing, and all of that kind of stuff. But in this world, where we're living where everything is being pushed out faster and faster, one way to at least equal the playing field is to have those automated tools catch more accessibility issues. So that's one thing I'm looking out for.

The other thing I'm excited about, outside of the actual technology stuff, is more and more people with disabilities themselves entering into the accessibility field and owning it. We ourselves, we have the lived experience and understand what makes something accessible to us. Now, I'm not saying that it has to be what we want. Because like for example, I always say, I wouldn't be doing my job as an accessibility professional if all I did was focus on issues for blind people. That's not who I am.

But what I'm saying is to have more people with different disabilities or impairments in the rooms where digital products and technologies are being developed. That's the only way that we will really press ahead. And again, it's not only accessibility roles. Why can't we have someone with hearing loss be a chief product officer? Why can't we have someone who is a color blind be a VP of design?

So we need to have people with disabilities or impairments both in accessibility, but also in roles where they are helping build and shape technology today and in the future, and also who are making decisions around who gets the funding around all of this technology. Because a lot of this stuff starts in the startup world, and then suddenly becomes the next big thing.

We need more angel investors and more of those folks to really understand that funding and including accessibility or people with disabilities as part of the mix, and as part of a requirement for receiving funding where that actually becomes so much more helpful.

JOE DEVON: By the way, I do believe that Pat Gelsinger, the CEO of Intel, actually does have hearing loss. And his family has a history of hearing loss. So you already have it right there. And I was fortunate enough to co-present with Ed Summers, who heads up accessibility for GitHub at GitHub Universe. And the CEO of GitHub Universe, sorry of GitHub, is Thomas Dohmke. And he said that the goal for GitHub now is to go from 100 million users to a billion users.

And I know that there is a serious effort there to make sure that people with disabilities will be able to do more when it comes to code. And I think that that's another really big thing. So thanks for bringing that up, Jennison.

KELLY MAHONEY: That's great. Like you both said, I mean, it's hard not to talk about AI right now. It definitely has some promising outcomes. But there are also issues we need to be aware of, Joe, like you said, with the code is not always exactly what you need it to be. And I'm glad you mentioned about hiring accessibility roles. We wanted to pick your brains about this specifically too, considering there are current economic challenges that we find ourselves in. Are there particular strategies that you would suggest to organizations to ensure that they're still prioritizing accessibility initiatives, including the hiring and growing of accessibility roles and departments? Do you have any tips for us on that?

JOE DEVON: Yes. This is a tough one, though, because getting that business case across has always been challenging. But there's a couple of different angles here when you're speaking to executives. Number one is that AI and accessibility are very tightly wound together. Because when you are trying to build really strong AI models, what is artificial intelligence? It's trying to mimic human beings. And if you want to really do a good job with human beings, with artificial intelligence, getting rid of that uncanny valley effect is important.

And you have to understand people's abilities in a very deep way. And the only way you'll be able to look at those differences is if you work with a population of people that have disabilities. So a lot of people are understanding it, and OpenAI for example worked with Be My Eyes to develop Be My AI, because they know that accessibility is important to the field of artificial intelligence.

And then the second thing I would mention is we have an aging population in America and in lots of different parts of the world. And the oldest millennial is now 42 years old. And when you start to hit 40, you already need the ability to have better color contrast in your fonts, to be able to have larger fonts. And this is the millennials that everybody is focusing on. Three of the six generations that you can market to are above 40 years old. And that 45, or 40 to 60, 65-year-old cohort is 25% of the population.

I'll say we, because I'm in that group. We have more money than any other generation. We spend more money than any other generation. And while a lot of the marketers are sitting there focused on millennials and Gen Z, they're missing this cohort that is really powerful and has the most money. And you cannot serve our group well if you do not pay attention to accessibility. And now that after years of trying to do the business case to enterprise, every time I bring these statistics up, there's no more questions. It's a no brainer.

KELLY MAHONEY: All right. Jennison, anything you wanted to add there? No pressure. I've got a next question to segue us right in.

JOE DEVON: You're on mute.

JENNISON ASUNCION: Nothing, yeah, nothing further to add, Joe. Joe was fairly eloquent there.

KELLY MAHONEY: Spot on. Well, thank you for sharing those tips, first of all. And in thinking about all of this, as technology is advancing and organizations are starting to implement these things to better serve those populations, how can organizations ensure that they're maintaining a user-centric approach in order to account for the diverse needs and the preferences of individuals with disabilities, or even just anyone who could benefit from accessibility features?

JENNISON ASUNCION: I think the key around that is including people with disabilities certainly in user research, but definitely in user testing of things. It's one thing to code and design to the guidelines and standards. But there's absolutely a difference between being conformant and being usable. And the only real way to assure that is to actually have people with different disabilities or impairments who operate these technologies in the way that people with different disabilities do. They know how to use their assistive technology. They know how they like their monitor set up, all of those things.

And so the best way is to bring in or to have people with different disabilities or impairments as part of the whole testing, user testing, QA testing, early design iterations. Bring them in. Bring us in on all of that early on. And then, again, make a plug for involving people with different disabilities or impairments as part of the user research. So much is invested at many companies in getting user research and doing user research. But not enough is yet there to include people with different disabilities or impairments as part of that mix.

KELLY MAHONEY: I think that's something that I've heard over and over again in the accessibility community is just including people with disabilities in the conversation is the best way to design for that group of people. And the only way to know their needs is to ask them. It seems a lot simpler.

JENNISON ASUNCION: Absolutely. Because I often hear from engineers and designers. They'll come to me and they'll go like, well, we made this accessible. And then they'll say, but the screen reader, for example, read all this other stuff. And I'm like, screen reader users. That's what they're used to. And we have different keystrokes and things that allow us to move rapidly through this or that, or increase the speed, decrease the speed, or whatnot.

And it's often like, oh, I didn't know that. These are assistive technologies. A lot of them are very sophisticated tools. And unless you use them daily, on a daily basis, you may not know what's behind them and what options and things are available.

Just real quick for whoever's monitoring the chat, I realize I've been dropping some things in the chat. But I think it's only been going to ask panelists. If whoever's managing the chat can see what I might have put in, I put in a link to the rap as well as to the foundation earlier. So oh, awesome. Thank you, Kim.

KELLY MAHONEY: Great. And you were mentioning that building digital ecosystems and developing things like this is very complex, of course. There's a lot of moving parts. And it often requires collaboration, not only across departments at an organization, but sometimes across industries. So how can businesses, government bodies, and the community at large work together to foster a more inclusive digital landscape? How can we all further that message?

JENNISON ASUNCION: It's really interesting. Because one area where a lot of companies collaborate on or many companies collaborate on is, in fact, accessibility. I love telling the story of when I was back in Canada working for RBC, which is one of Canada's top five financial institutions. As competitive as they are even to this day, they still get together and did when I worked in banking back in Canada, they got together at least quarterly to discuss accessibility and to share and exchange best practice and things.

Because we were trying to solve some of the same pressing issues. And the same can be said today. The social media companies, we all chat. We know that a lot of the e-commerce companies chat amongst themselves and share a lot of useful information. Because again, a part of it is not wanting to reinvent the wheel. Now obviously, we all want to innovate and we all ourselves come up with our own unique solutions to things sometimes.

But there are some really big accessibility problems that solving it on our own is just not necessarily the way to go. We need expertise from all quarters. So I'd like to think that accessibility is one of those areas where as competitive as we are in tech, we do come together. And when we do, amazing stuff does happen.

KELLY MAHONEY: Thank you for that insight, and to further what you're talking about with the importance and as digital accessibility is growing in awareness, are there emerging legal or ethical considerations that businesses and developers should be mindful of when they're making digital products, when they're building them, or launching them?

JOE DEVON: European Accessibility Act.

JENNISON ASUNCION: Yeah, absolutely. Go for it, Joe.

JOE DEVON: Yeah. That's a bomb ready to explode. And it's unfortunately it's going to be five years or six years until every new product has to be accessible in Europe. So any business that's doing business in Europe is absolutely going to be required to make their digital products accessible. Sorry, that is for old products. Every new product is going to be next year. But all the old products are going to have to be remediated. And unfortunately a lot of organizations are going to wait until the last minute.

But within six years, we are going to see that accessibility is going to be table stakes in Europe. And for new products, it's going to be next year. So I think it's June or July. That's a huge, huge deal. But again, like you need to have the foundation to be legal in order to get organizations to pay attention. But you still have to make it part of your culture if you want to actually do this well. If you're just ticking boxes, it's not going to really work very well.

JENNISON ASUNCION: I just wanted to highlight a point that, Joe, you brought up in terms of the remediation. I mean if there's any argument to be made to make things accessible, it's just the absolute cost associated with having to clear the tech debt that is associated with not making things accessible from the get-go. So many organizations end up having to basically address bugs that are within the code that have been in the code for months, if not years. And that costs time and money-- engineering time, design time, and all of that. The amount of remediation that's going to have to happen because of these laws that are coming into place, it's going to hurt.

So we always say, if you're able to get that stuff done sooner rather than later, that pain will be less if not definitely not there at all. And I think someone may have put something in the chat about the European Accessibility Act.

JOE DEVON: Yeah, I'm going to actually share a couple of links in the chat, so that you can do some further reading.

KELLY MAHONEY: Thank you for that. I know there's also new legislation popping up elsewhere, not just Europe, but with it coming everywhere or just being developed everywhere, it seems that education would be crucial in not only making sure people are aware of the requirements, but also promoting, furthering, and really ingraining digital accessibility at organizations, like you said, more than just ticking a box.

JENNISON ASUNCION: Absolutely. And could I give-- just on the education front.

KELLY MAHONEY: Yeah.

JENNISON ASUNCION: If we can give a shout-out to a sister organization to ours, which is called Teach Access, who are really looking at closing the gap within the higher education system. Because engineers, computer science students, designers, and related students studying related fields are not in the main learning about accessibility in the classroom. That that's a big issue.

And our friends over at Teach Access are doing their part to close that particular gap. So just a big shout-out to them and the work they're doing, just as you brought up the term education. Because that's an elephant in the room is that if we're not teaching our college students, boot camp, people taking boot camps, and even in the lower levels, K through 12. If we're not introducing them and exposing them to the concepts of accessibility in that stage, then that's in there lies the problem but that people aren't getting it early on.

So again, just to shout out to the folks at Teach Access, because we are basically doing complementary work with trying to close those knowledge gaps.

KELLY MAHONEY: That's great. Thank you. We sent a link in the chat for Teach Access as well. That's exactly what I was going to ask you, how organizations or end users and developers can educate themselves to make sure that they're staying in touch with this. And just a shameless plug for 3Play, Joe mentioned Lainey Feingold in the chat. And we are actually having her on a webinar in the next week or so. It's a two-part webinar.

JENNISON ASUNCION: We're big fans of hers.

KELLY We are too. Yeah, she does her annual digital accessibility legal update. There's a link in the chat for anyone who would like to register for that. But we are also big fans of hers. So I'm really glad you brought her up.

MAHONEY:

JENNISON Absolutely, and she's been a big fan of GAAD and a big supporter. One of the other things just real quick while we're talking about educating and things like that, is a lot of tech companies have internship programs. And we need more of those internship programs to have interns who are working on accessibility as part of what they're doing. So if there are companies out there that are investing in accessibility right now, one of the ways to help with the education piece is to make sure internships have that aspect of accessibility exposure in there as well.

ASUNCION:

KELLY And Joe, was there something you wanted to add on that education piece?

MAHONEY:

JOE DEVON: I've just been posting it in the chat. So Lainey Feingold, and then somebody was asking about a plugin for WordPress, so that was one of our Gaadys award winners. So I shared the link in there as well. And then WebAIM has a good tutorial. W3C has a good tutorial. And then those are the free ones. Does Knowbility have a tutorial, Jennison?

JENNISON They definitely have a content on their site that people can check on, knowbility.org.

ASUNCION:

JOE DEVON: Yeah.

JENNISON And if nothing else, there is an abundance of material online if you use your favorite search engine, a lot of the Udacity and some of the other large players, LinkedIn Learning, have courses on accessibility. And that that's growing as well. So there is no excuse now for people to not understand or learn about accessibility. Some people think that accessibility is this new thing that's popped up just now.

ASUNCION:

But guidelines around accessibility have existed at least from the W3C perspective, World Wide Web Consortium. Was it 1999 was when they first launched the first Web Content Accessibility Guidelines? So it's not that accessibility hasn't been around even before then. But it's just now gaining much more momentum, which we love. And whatever role we through GAAD have and the foundation are being able to contribute to its visibility-- I think, Joe, you'll agree with me-- we feel privileged to be able to do that.

JOE DEVON: Yeah, absolutely. And I've just been sharing a bunch of little links over here on the training. And there was something-- oh, another thing. I mean, it's cliché at this point. It feels silly to say it. But it doesn't hurt to also ask ChatGPT. There's some great learnings that you can do over there.

I should probably create, if nobody else has already, a custom GPT for that now that they have these ability to create a custom GPT. It isn't very hard. So if nobody else does it, just hit me up and I'll do it and share the link with you.

JENNISON Another project.

ASUNCION:

JOE DEVON: Yeah, but this is a quick, easy one.

KELLY Yeah. That sounds great. Now we're in a brainstorming session. As we move into the home stretch here, I want to ask. These are all great tools for pushing forward accessibility initiatives. How would you recommend that organizations measure the success of their digital accessibility initiatives?

JENNISON I would say to the degree to which they measure the success of any other initiative, they should be doing the same on accessibility. Make accessibility an OKR for your leaders, your design leaders, your engineering leaders. That's one way. That's one certain way to do it. Track your bugs. People are always asking the question, how accessible are we? Well, the best way to find out is use your bug tracking systems and label bugs as accessibility bugs, and put ownership on all of that stuff.

And it might be painful in the beginning, but it's only through things like seeing how many potentially hundreds of accessibility bugs you have, and then just slowly over time closing those, decreasing those numbers over time is the best thing. But I think it does bear repeating. It's something that it's a mantra for us within the accessibility community. It is a journey. No one's going to become accessible overnight. You need to figure out what KPIs will work best within your culture.

But certainly, start. You've got to start somewhere. Everyone's like, well, there's so much to do. Yes. There is absolutely so much to do. But you've got to pick one project even. Improve the accessibility of that one project as a start. And then go from there.

And certainly progress over perfection is another mantra that many of us subscribe to. Because it's not always going to be perfect. And in our world today where code is being pushed out almost every other day on features, things are going to break. That's just the reality.

But if we do nothing, that's even worse, right? So yeah, so hopefully that helps on that.

KELLY Yeah, absolutely. Something is always better than nothing. Joe, did you have something you want to add?
MAHONEY:

JOE DEVON: Yeah. Just wanted to add that there's actually some work being done to codify the progress or the different areas where you need to progress. And it's called the Accessibility Maturity Model. And the W3C, I shared the link of that, has been working on it. There's lots of folks that have worked on it for many years. But finally, we're seeing something easily accessible on the internet for this maturity model. So check out the links there.

JENNISON Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely, use your favorite search engine and just type accessibility maturity model, and
ASUNCION: between the W3C and a couple of other organizations and industry collaborations, there's a dearth of different models out there that different companies can pick from.

KELLY Great. Thank you. We are in the last minute here. This has been such an amazing conversation. I just want to let
MAHONEY: the audience know that 3Play is happy to be making a donation to the GAAD Foundation on this Giving Tuesday. And we encourage those of you who can to do the same but we recognize this is not the easiest way for everyone to get involved. So we've left a link to the GAAD Foundation in the chat for you to check them out. Learn more about how you may be able to get involved.

Thank you very much, again, Joe and Jennison, for this conversation. It's been amazing.

JOE DEVON: Thank you.

JENNISON

Yeah, thank you so much. And for those of you who may have access to the Benevity platform, you can find us on there as well for employee matching on today, Giving Tuesday. And we really appreciate the support of 3Play Media, everyone there, and everyone who's in the audience here. Definitely, we enjoyed talking about this, and happy Giving Tuesday to all of the nonprofits out there that are doing their part to furthering the cause of digital access and digital inclusion.

JOE DEVON:

That was such a great final line. All I can say is plus one to that one. Thanks, Jennison.

KELLY

Sometimes that's all you need. This has been a wonderful session. Thank you, everyone, for coming and I hope

MAHONEY:

you have a wonderful rest of your Giving Tuesday.