

# Panel transcription: Embracing Accessibility in Product Design & Development

**December 14, 2023**

**Lauri Borén:** There's a bunch of, uh, free seats here at the front, so please don't be shy, just come closer.

All right, let's, let's get started. So, um, first of all, hi everybody. Uh, my name is Lauri Boren. I am a creative director at REAKTOR. Um, and my background is in product design. So, I've been building, um, designing and building software in, in teams for, for most of my career. And, and, um, yeah, very excited to be here.

Um, I'll just say a couple of words before we, before we get started with the panel discussion. So, um, first of all, thank you to Consulate General of Finland for partnering with us with this event, um, and, um, hosting us tonight. Um, it's a great space. Good, good place to be in. And, um, very festive, so. Yeah, thank you. Um, second, um, a couple of words about REAKTOR. So, we are a technology consultancy. We help our clients build and design digital products. Um, we are about 50 people here in North America. Um, about 700 globally, um, across cities, um, Helsinki, um, Tokyo, Amsterdam, Lisbon, and New York. And, and other parts of North America, a few other cities.

Um, yeah, we, we partner with our clients. Help them build their digital products. Um, brands you might have known, um, HBO, for example, Adidas, um, Tommy Hilfiger, um, Paramount, Delta Airlines. So, clients that are big. But also clients that are a little bit smaller than that. And, um, yeah, that's, that's REAKTOR in a, in a nutshell.

Um, tonight we'll have a panel discussion about accessibility. Um, and not just from the design perspective. Rather than something that is, is maybe relevant for everybody who is, um, participating in building digital products, um, making decisions on like whether it makes to invest in, in accessibility when, when, uh, these things are being built.

And also, like, us all as humans and users of, of different products. Accessibility is something that will, um, if not now, then eventually touch on, on all of us. Um, the panel discussion, I believe, is going to be on two different levels. So, first, why. Why, uh, should we be focusing on accessibility in, in the first place?

And then the second part is how. What do people who are on different teams building products or, or making decisions about, um, accessibility, how can they make sure that the world is moving to a more accessible direction? Um, we have some great panelists, um, with us here tonight. Um, Simone, um, Soren, um, Gopal. Thank you for being here. Um, and, um, the panel discussion will be moderated by Mira, uh, from REAKTOR. And last thing, thank you everybody for being here. Um, please don't be shy, um, ask questions. Participate in the conversation. Um, say hi to the person sitting next to you, and, and, um, yeah, we're all in this together. So, welcome and enjoy the evening.

**Mira Myllylä:** All right. So good evening again. And, uh, yes, thank you all, uh, for coming here tonight in person or remotely. Uh, warm welcome to our panel discussion on embracing accessibility in product design and development. We're, uh, by the way, going to have a Q& A session towards the end. So, you can save your questions. Either put those to the chat, or ask here if you're participating in person once we, uh, get our panel discussion, um, first.

A little bit background, um, before we jump into the panel discussion. My name is Mira Myllala and as Lauri told, I'm a designer at REAKTOR. And I'm joined here, um, by these amazing accessibility, um, experts and advocates who we've asked to come here to share a little bit about their knowledge about accessibility.

The reason why we wanted to organize this event is that we haven't done enough. There are 4 percent of websites in the in the world that are accessible. And accessibility is nothing new. But still we're in the situation where so many people are being left out. So I think, what we believe in is that our goal should be to increase the product quality and the ways of working so that more people can be part of creating and using the products and services that we create.

By the way, is my mic working good? Um, so again, that's why we have you guys here tonight. Thank you so much. Um, I also want to give my gratitude to our friends at UNFPA for their help and collaboration in connecting us with some of our amazing panelists here tonight. But who do we have here? First, let me introduce you to **Simon Jennerson**, to the very left. She's the head of product accessibility and inclusion at **Aon**. Who works closely with strategic roadmaps, vision and execution of assessment products that support diverse user needs and help make better talent decisions. She understand what's it like to work on the very grassroots level where the changes are being made. But also how to go beyond what we should do and focus on the real life settings that determine what needs to be done.

Next up here in the middle, we have **Soren Hambi**. They are a senior manager of UX and digital design at Benjamin Moore. And in addition to their background in web design, **Soren** is currently studying Masters of Arts of Disability Studies at the City University of New York. They're passionate about how to incorporate different, different levels of knowledge, capabilities, and desires that different teams have on accessibility. So she, um, they must have said, a lot to say of how we can take that into action, um, account when working in a team setting.

Last but not least, **Gopal Mitra**, to my right, who's a global lead on disability at UNICEF headquarters, where he provides strategic and technical leadership to deliver on UNICEF's global commitments on disability inclusion. He has also led the disability inclusion team in the executive office of the Secretary General. And worked on implementation of the UN disability inclusion strategy. He's going to provide us some insight on disability inclusion, um, inclusive humanitarian action, assistive technology, and of course accessibility.

So we have pretty much a powerhouse panel here tonight. And thank you again for joining us. I'm sure we will all learn very much from all of you. As Laura mentioned, we will have two main themes that we'll be discussing today. We're going to start by talking about why and how accessibility is our responsibility as digital professionals. And move on to talk about how to build a better ground for implementing it in practice.

So, a little warm up question, although going straight to the deep end. What are the most common challenges with the teams, clients, or organizations that you work with? Meaning, what's the most common challenge for them to get buy in regarding accessibility? Simone, do you want to start?

**E. Simone Jenerson:** The most common challenge to get buy in? Uh, I think, honestly, I think accessibility, it, it, it is similar to UX. Uh, for those that are, you know, in the room and, and are UX professionals, uh, or understand UX adjacently. Um, It is trying to understand the importance of it. Um, why we should, uh, ensure that an experience, be it an accessible one or otherwise, uh, is an important topic to lean into, uh, and to be intentional about, and to be thoughtful, uh, of in all stages. Um, from conception to, uh, post production. Um, so, ask me the question again, so I can get more to the point.

**Mira Myllylä:** So what's the most common challenge for them to get buy in regarding accessibility?

**E. Simone Jenerson:** Yes. Uh, so, so the challenge is just, is just understanding that it is a thing to focus on. Period. And it's not an add on. Uh, and we understand that it's not an add on. Uh, it's not something that's, that's a compliance issue. You know, it's not something because we're being sued. It's, it is an experience. It, it is a part of the experience. Not, not some separate experience either. It is the experience period. And, uh, and we need to focus on it just, just for that reason alone.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you. Sorin, want to go next?

**Soren Hamby:** I'd love to. Uh, I think part of it is there's a, there's this set of lived experiences that we kind of view life through like lenses of a camera. And You have your own set. There's, there's nothing wrong with that. But it only allows you to see what's within those lenses and focus on certain things that are within your frame of experience.

Uh, for instance, before I was experiencing a visual disability, I didn't know what it was like to live with a visual disability. And I purposefully work with teams that have diverse backgrounds so that I can have those kinds of spots that I don't know about covered. So like, I don't know what the immigrant experience is like.

I don't know what it's like to live without internet or with really slow internet as an adult. Uh, I don't know what it's like to not have an ATM in my town. So, things like that are, are places where people just don't even think of the implications of the technology that they're building because we, we live in our own bubbles sometimes. And we're all guilty of that. So I think, you know, just like in UX where we have to check our, our cognitive biases, we have to do that with accessibility, as well. And we have to listen to the people that are most affected by it. And I think that's, honestly, the biggest challenge with user experience, is that we have to, we have to be mindful that we're not building for ourselves. We're building for other people. And that it's not, it's, it's not a separate experience, like Simone said. It's, it's the experience of the people that we serve. And we're not the voice of ourselves. We're the voice of the user. So, I think just awareness is a huge part of it because people don't see it as part of the center of excellence of coding. Or the center of excellence of design. And that's what we're here to change. We want it to be part of an excellent product. There's no MVP without accessibility.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you, Soren. And What about you, Gopal?

**Gopal Mitra:** And what is the scope and the magnitude of the issue of the people that you serve? Uh, uh, customer base or the communities that we live in? Here we are talking about a significant part of the population, right? 15 to 16 percent of the population are people with disabilities. And that translates to about 1 point 2, 1 point 3 billion people in the world. Includes 240 million children with disabilities, right? Uh, if you see the data from the World Health Organization, since the 2 point 5 billion people use one or more assistive devices, or require glasses, hearing aids, assistive software, wheelchairs, right, and with an aging population, this number is going to go up to 3 point 5 billion by 2050. Now that's a big, that's big numbers, right?

Could you hear what I said? Okay. Thank you. So, these are big numbers. So, and we know that accessibility is the fundamental precondition for inclusion. We have just heard, I mean, no accessibility, no inclusion. Period. It's not the only thing, but the most fundamental thing, right? And so, if you put these two together, the, the scope, the magnitude of the issue, and the importance of the issue, there is only one thing. It absolutely is the right thing to do. But it's not only the right thing to do. It's also the smart thing to do. Because then you have 2 point 5 billion to 3 billion people who will be able to interact better with what you are, we all are doing. And what we are trying to do, right? So, I'll stop there.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you. Yeah, that's definitely an impressive number and we can all agree that it's a huge part of people

**E. Simone Jenerson:** And I bet you didn't know that this was an assistive technology, I mean...

**Mira Myllylä:** Yes, that too.

**E. Simone Jenerson:** That's a whole other thought that I have for much, much later.

Yeah.

**Mira Myllylä:** I think my next question is like, yes, we recognize that accessibility is important and it's part of product quality. And there's no inclusion without accessibility. But still, as mentioned earlier, 96 percent of websites are inaccessible. So, I'd like to hear, in your opinion, why do you think we're still lagging behind? And maybe Soren, would you mind starting?

**Soren Hamby:** Sure. Uh, I think part of it is that we don't have buy in. We don't have, uh, support. And we don't have a robust product team to support, uh,

accessibility. We don't make it part of that center of excellence. So, if we don't require people to be accountable for the things that they make, and we don't require that, you know, things are coded well, and they're also coded accessibly, then people aren't going to do it. If you don't make it part of the job, then people aren't going to do it. It's then a volunteer effort. And nobody wants to do more than their job. They don't want to volunteer to do more work. So, I think, you know, we have to, create the time and space for people to learn. We have to create the time and space for people to be wrong and the psychological safety to learn. And I think that's a huge part of it. Because in tech, there's this, there's this big conception about being right and being good and being excellent. And when you walk into a space and you tell developers that have been developing for 10, 20, 30 years, hey, you're doing that wrong, they don't want to hear that. And that's, that's the way a lot of people in accessibility sometimes come across. Even if that's not what they mean. And that's sometimes how it's received. Even if that's not what's said. So, I think sometimes it's, It's the approach and it's the messaging from the company. It's about creating a culture that supports accessibility and that values it. And not just, oh, that's a little compliance box that we checked. Oh, we send it to legal. We send it to accessibility. It's accessibility is the fabric of everything that we do. I'm sure you have more to say.

**E. Simone Jenerson:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, that's that was golden. Um, in the creating the culture, I think, is also holding on to the culture that exists. I want to believe, and I'm going to believe, that everyone in this room cares. Or else you wouldn't be here, right?

So, you are probably not the anomaly. I'm sure that there is another person just like you or similar to you in terms of care as it relates to, you know, them doing accessibility within their domain. So you're doing in UX. They're doing it in dev. Somebody else is doing it, uh, in some other place, uh, along the, you know, digital products.

It is, the creation is also holding on to the culture that already exists. The people that are already doing that work. You're finding your tribe amongst the various people within the chain of digital product creation. Uh, and banding together and, and, uh, and creating accessible products. Um, so I think that that's, that's an important thing to, um, just kind of want to dovetail on something that you said, which was, you know, yes, that culture of, uh, I, I, I call it, um, perfection without practice. Uh, you know, which is that, that part that you mentioned where there's no psychological safety. It's, we must get this right. The end. You know, we get paid to be right. The end. No, we, you know, I mean, yes, but no. You know, we, we, we also must, uh, have the space. You didn't become master

developer, you know, from the womb. Like you, you took time to, you know, hone your craft and, and practice and, and, and, and doodle and perfect. Uh, so too is with accessibility. Um, in fact, I want to believe all of us here, you know, we had to practice in our crafts of accessibility and our craft of Inclusion we had to learn it from somewhere to get to get here in front of you. So too who are those that are trying to understand, where do we start with accessibility? And or how do we coalesce around, a group of, of passionate, interested people who want to do the right thing. But for whatever reason haven't been able to up to this point. So I think those are some of the things to that that feed into that.

**Gopal Mitra:** Uh, you want me?

**Mira Myllylä:** Yes, go ahead Gopal.

**Gopal Mitra:** And at UNICEF, you know, we work across the world in different settings, low income, humanitarian, different settings. And when we talk about accessibility, I call them the three or four myths. that exist, uh, that, um, sort of because of which people do not, uh, do it or don't consider it. The first myth I, I think it's, uh, accessibility is too expensive. Right? Uh, we are working on tight budgets. It's, it's expensive. It will require a lot of money. But we know it's not that. I can come back deeper on that later. The second myth is, um, there are very few people who will need this. So, I can afford to ignore it. And I'm talking about places where laws, legislation, enforcement are not that great, right? I can do without it. The third is there are very specific, specialized set of people who can do accessibility. It's not my job. I'm a regular developer. I'm a regular tech guy. You know? It's not my, there are specific people who do accessibility. It's not for me. It's not in my portfolio, my domain. It's, it's seen as a very unique, specific piece of work. If you are doing programs, projects, some solutions for people with disabilities, only then, you need to consider it. Otherwise not. And I call them the three myths because they do not stand to the test of evidence, you know? But these are, I mean, apart, in addition to what you all said, which are absolutely spot on, in different contexts we also see these. In humanitarian situations, for example, uh, we see that the thing that, oh, we, it's life saving, you know, all our products, digital products are used or, you know, physical products. We are trying to save normal children, quote unquote. So, we are not being able to save them, disabled children, oh my God, let's talk about it tomorrow. Yeah? And when the whole world went into COVID and learning became remote, you can imagine the implication that it had over 15, 20 percent of the population who could not access it, the digital learning environment, the messaging around COVID and, because it was inaccessible, right? So that is the implication that it had.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you, Gopal. And yeah, it's actually, that made me think of also research that, um, there's from, uh, 2018, uh, the number of people with disabilities in the workforce has increased from 29 percent to 37. The most progress since the start of the pandemic in 2020. So this, this example is just one of the examples of the increased opportunities to work from home. And as you mentioned, we've had to learned our way to make better and easier. But are there any any other chances, changes that you have noticed in your field that signals that we're moving to, towards the right direction?

**E. Simone Jenerson:** Um, well, I've noticed, um, that we are actually hiring more. Uh, I'm starting to see job descriptions with accessibility in the title. Uh, or if not in the title, certainly as a part of the responsibilities, uh, that are expected. Uh, so that's nice. Um, though I will say, don't wait on that title. Uh, be the rogue and just go ahead on and just include it on in. Uh, but it's nice to see it. Um, I think some other changes too is conversations like this are happening more. Now, I'm not going to say that I've been a part of this space for too long. You check my resume, you're going to see, listen, what are you talking about, lady? But, um, it's more part of my common feed than, than some specialized place that I had to go hunt and peck and find, right? And that's nice, that this is becoming more a part of the lexicon and the consciousness. Um, and I think that the more that it is, it is a part of the broad, broader space, uh, then, you know, clearly it becomes a part of the watercooler talk. It becomes a part of, you know, the everyday conversation within company that, you know, you don't have to fight so hard being that one rascally rabbit that's like, hey, accessibility, you know, like, no, wait, we're all talking about it. So, like, what you're saying makes sense, you know? So I think those are some two good indicators, at least from a workforce situation that that are emerging existence seems to be escalating in a positive way.

**Soren Hamby:** I see a lot of people talking about the difference that addressing accessibility earlier and the development process can make. We've seen a lot of people that have used accessibility as kind of a bottleneck resource. So, you get to the end of QA and then QA has done all of their checks. And then they send the finished product over to accessibility. And that's a very backwards way of thinking about things. One, because it's really only retrofitting a UI, right? You're saying, let me take this thing that was built for, you know, whatever sample that we tested it with. And let me kind of shove accessibility back onto it like a poor fitting cap. And what we really need to be moving towards is more mature accessibility models where we're thinking about it in the service design. We're thinking about it when we're hiring people. We're thinking about it in our education, our processes. Uh, we make it a part of our vendor selection. So it's this holistic idea of accessibility operations that really permeates through every role. And it's, it's specific. It's timely. And it's, it's very measurable. Because you



give each role a piece of what their responsibility and accessibility is. And you make everyone responsible. So, people in procurement are responsible for checking vendors. Copywriters are responsible for making sure that the text is, you know, at the level that it needs to be so it's understandable by people that have cognitive disabilities. They're responsible for writing alt text. So you don't put it all on the design team, all on the development team, or all on a bunch of accessibility professionals. And then your accessibility professionals become coaches. They become the teach someone to fish people. So, they're then, we are then the people that are cheerleading accessibility and advocating for accessibility and making sure that we have support from the c suite and from the Vision and Advisory committees. And all of that kind of stuff, we get to do that. Because we're hyped about this. Like, it's, it's stuff that we love and we get excited about. And then everyone else, you can be not as excited. But it's still part of your job. So, then it doesn't fall on the people that are excited. And then we don't get burnt out. I think that's another big part of it, is that when you put everything on a couple of accessibility professionals, accessibility professionals get burnt out. There's not enough of us to shoulder the entire weight of accessibility. And a good number of accessibility professionals are disabled people. So then you're also saying, hey, disabled people, you're responsible for creating your own accessibility, essentially. You're responsible for solving this problem that the world has created of ableism. So anyways, I'll stop there.

**Gopal Mitra:** Taking that thought further, uh, thank God nobody told me, build your own house. But I totally agree. And we definitely see accessibility, the awareness on accessibility, even if you take a some of the most difficult countries in the world context wise. The Somalias and the Afghanistans, we've seen accessibility across the board awareness is far more than it, what it was even seven, eight years back, right? We are really seeing changes, as we are seeing, even in, in low income countries, least developed countries. Uh, more and more. procurement contracts, digital procurement contracts. Including a component of accessibility right from the tender stage, you know? A development of the tenders. We see more and more, um, people, uh, uh, trying to address it. For example, at UNICEF, we have an amazing initiative. You know, conventional textbook, a conventional hard copy textbook, textbook is not accessible to a large number of children with disabilities. So accessible digital textbooks is something that we have been working on. There's quite a lot of interest and uptake on that. And the, the, the, the point is that, you know, that we have to realize, as Mira said, you see, 4 percent of websites are accessible, right? So over the last five years, we have seen a lot of improvement. So, but we start, we have started from a very low base. So, even after you make damn 500 percent progress, it goes from 1 percent to 5%, you know? And that's, that is, that's an issue. And the point is, it require all of us, each one of us and that relentless conscious effort, if you want to really make it all pervasive and

visible, right? Otherwise, the base starting base is so low, even if you make 1000 percent progress, it's not going to show up in the lives of many significant proportion of the population, right? It remains in pockets otherwise.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you, Gopal. Yeah, I, as we heard, like, we need some passionate people who are going to kick start the process. And I'd like to know next in, what do you think, how we could support these passionate people who are already putting the efforts into accessibility? How can we make sure that their efforts are taken into action?

**E. Simone Jenerson:** Um, ha, that's a big question. Um, I'm going to start in the idealistic space. Uh, in the happy path space, where you have, uh, an environment, um, we can make that hyperlocal. Where you have a manager, right? That, uh, uh, understands at the very least, uh, what we're all talking about here. What we're all came to hear, uh, about. Um, creating that space, you talked about that earlier. So, creating that space to learn. But I think also to, actually putting it as a part of responsibilities. Putting it as a part of definition of done. Putting it as a part of um, of what our normal operations are. Our normal, uh, output, expected outputs and expected expectations are. Um, and doing it in that way is how you can accomplish, you know, answer the question which was asked. Um, I think, uh, and that, that helps with that. Um. ask that one more time. I always have like two or three things going on in this head.

**Mira Myllylä:** So how we can support these passionate people who are who are already doing the job?

**E. Simone Jenerson:** There you go. So that way it's shoulders, it's not that one person that's doing it. But it's spread out amongst others whose job it is to just create products. How about that? Um, other than that, I think that I know, this might be anecdotal. And I'd love to actually hear from my panelists here, my peers. Where we've got, we're passionate, and we're doing all of the things, and we're doing it with limited resources. And by resources, I'm not, I mean, I'm not meaning a whole lot. Can we get training? Can we get time to go to things like this? Can we be immersed in the populations in which, you know, we are servicing? Um, resources, right? Like, we, we, it, it, when a developer or a development manager comes to their senior management and says, listen, you know, we are trying to upskill and learn a new language or learn a new tool in order to deploy the things we need to deploy or write the code that we need to write.

There's, no one bats an eye. Sure. We've allotted resources. We did that a whole year ago. We were waiting for you to come here. Please. Thanks. Take that. Not

a hundred people, but sixty. Go. For us, it's like, and you're making the case for what now? What? No! We, we need resources and tools and things to do our jobs. And it is hard enough to educate and advocate for the, the program, for the project, for the topic without having to advocate for ourselves personally.

Um, and like, no, I'm tired. I'm tired. And you know, take this Reddit. Go, go read that. Because you know, I got other stuff to do. I don't have time to do this. So, resources as well, uh, for not just the program or the project or the individuals that we're trying to help, uh, as passionate people. But resources for our, our own selves so we can continue to be fueled and, uh, and continue to learn and continue to provide that passion that, that is expected of us since we've put ourselves out there as passionate people.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you. What about you, Sorin?

**Soren Hamby:** So, I'm gonna take a, the less idealistic, more practical approach here. Uh, one of the things I'm really passionate about is design systems. And, uh, design system and, uh, code, coded components can be a really, really powerful tool for development teams to dig into accessibility. When you tell, like, a developer, now you have to become good at accessibility, I'm sorry. You're, you gotta learn this new thing. It's a huge, huge topic. Like, learn everything. Okay. But if you say, hey, I need you to work on form fields. And I want you to dive deep into this documentation that Soren has wrote for you on form fields and then I need you to, to code these components.

Then you know that every single component that has a form field in it, it's designed accessibly, it's coded accessibly, and it's documented accessibly. So, then when you go and you revisit it, accessibility is written into the documentation for how to use that form. And so, by breaking things down into smaller pieces, you take some of the overwhelm away from everyone else. You take some of the overwhelm away from us. That, the passionate people. Uh, and you're kind of like shifting it into just smaller, more digestible bites. Um, one of the things that I've done is start to create what I call swipe files for definition of done and definition of ready. And anytime that somebody is working on something that has to do with, let's say, let's go back to form fields again. There's criteria that is pulled directly from the, uh, WCAG guidelines that says, here's what you have to consider. And so it's just it's already there. It's in a spreadsheet All they have to do is just go to that tab and copy it and paste it into a Jira ticket. So, they don't even have to know this stuff. Like, memorizing those guidelines does not actually help you be good at accessibility. Empathy, learning to learn and being flexible helps you to be good at accessibility. And learning to, to be wrong and say, huh, I guess that didn't work. And that is a really hard

thing to learn. I would say, like, as a more senior designer that got into accessibility, I was like, wow, so many of the things I was doing was so wrong. Like, I'm embarrassed to put this in my portfolio now because anybody looking at that goes, oh, that's not accessible. And I'm guilty of it. Everybody's guilty of it. And we all need to do better. And I think like being able to own that and say, it's okay to make mistakes. It's okay to be wrong. And I'm going to make it easier for the person that comes after me is, is the best thing that you can do to support others. Even people that aren't really, really passionate about accessibility.

**Gopal Mitra:** Amazing. I think amazing points have already been said in, um, on top of all these things, it really helps if there is leadership, buy in and commitment. Right? That's what we have seen. The pace of change, including and mainly on issues like accessibility, it really speeds up when the leadership is behind it. The messaging internal and external is done in a way that it values accessibility and resources are allocated. Uh, these are some recipes in which, through which accessibility we have seen getting accelerated.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you. I was just about to ask what about the role of leadership, but you got me there. Yeah, I'm, I would be interested in hearing more about the learning part that we kind of started here already. You also mentioned the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines that kind of work as the base for regulation here in the U. S. Also in Europe. And, yes, it's a very scary list of 86 criteria that we would need to memorize. Um, and even besides those, like, more technical, functional accessibility features, there's still so much more. And as you said, like, the empathy part of it. So, I don't know, where can people start if they're new to the topic? And how could we make that information more accessible if people want to learn more?

**Soren Hamby:** So I, I think that it's really great for people to become more familiar with the topic of disability, of disability justice, of accessible tech, as well of, of like products that are accessible. But also of assistive tech. So, like until I started using, uh, like orientation and mobility cane, and I had no idea what it was like to use that. I had no idea what it was like to use voiceover before I had to use it. And so, I, I think that people have these conceptions about the technology that we use as people with disabilities, uh, that they, they kind of also think that, like, oh, voiceover testing or screenwriter testing or keyboard testing, that's for the accessibility professionals. That's for the accessibility testers. And testing with people that have disabilities is so important. I can't stress it enough. But I think it's also important that you understand it as a professional. Like, even just exposure through social media, watching how people use like braille keyboards on their phone has like completely changed

the way that I looked at how people use technology and how they navigate the world. And I don't think you can understand, through. Like, a simulation of, like, putting a blindfold on and wandering around a room for half an hour. Or any of these other kind of like empathy exercises, what it's really like to have a disability. And like, the frustration that comes with it. The barriers that come with it. I don't know if like, you can really get the feeling of like walking into an airport bathroom and not knowing where to go. And it's just like, it's so different to have a disability. And I think that the exposure to that experience is just so important. Um, I'm sure, Gopal, you have a lot more to say about that.

**Gopal Mitra:** No, uh, you hit the nail on the head. Like, I think, uh, the exposure, the experience, the empathy, uh, that you get, uh, uh, when we interact or we have people with disabilities in our, uh, amidst us, in our midst. And uh, uh, that's the reason, you know, it's so important to have, uh, people with disabilities as part of our workforce. And what I would like to say is. People with disabilities are a very diverse group. Yeah? People with diverse sort of impairments. What is accessibility as with, Soren not me, as a blind or visually impaired, is totally different from someone who has a cognitive disability. Someone who has a, who's deaf, right? It's totally different. I mean, for a blind person and deaf person, the accessibility is opposite because I hear and touch and that's how I feel. And the person who is deaf, does it visually, right? So, and those type of, um, and it's not theory. The moment we interact with people, we have people with disabilities in our midst, midst. Uh, we have people with disabilities as part of our workforce. Uh, we interact regularly with them. We create those spaces where the interaction can happen. I think that's one way to get it. And and the way in which you cannot go wrong. You know, because what you learn is from, uh, near, sort of, lived or firsthand experience. Yeah.

**E. Simone Jenerson:** I mean, absolutely. Um, I, I think what we're talking to here about is dignity, independence, and living life in a very full way. Being your full selves. And how do you and or those that you are creating for do that? That's what we're talking about. Period. Full stop. Right? And so to deny that through ignorance, be it intentional or unintentional, is a disservice. It's a crime. It's, it's a lot of things. And so that empathy is the starting point. We get that here, okay. We all understand that. So, and they did a beautiful job of explaining that. Once you're past that part and once you're immersed in that part, I should say. Because you don't go past it. You're experiencing it. Once you see it, you can't unsee it as someone I was speaking with said earlier, that I was talking with. You can't unsee it. The start I believe is starting with what it is that you do. And I challenge that idea of, you know, bad accessibility is worse than no accessibility. I, it, it, it's a paralysis, uh, that kind of talk. I think in the culture of learning, um, in, in that spirit of learning, if you are a designer, how are your

design specs, uh, how are they communicating accessibility? Uh, be it through annotation or otherwise. If you're a developer, how are you doing good code that, you know, allows for a screen reader or a keyboard or keyboard navigation to traverse your site. Uh, if you are a UX researcher, how are you including those voices? How are your findings communicating, um, uh, what you understand from the inclusion of such, uh, populations? Wherever you are, you start there. And then the next stage of that, uh, though you didn't ask, uh, is getting, getting the partnership, as mentioned earlier, of other passionate people in the domains in which you can take, if you're in the more conceptual phase, i. e. UX for that matter. How do you bring that into the development phase? If you're in the development phase, how do you, you know, ensure that QA, you know. Wherever you are, further up and down the pipeline, how are you getting your comrades who are also similarly passionate about this topic, how are you ensuring that either it's getting developed and or, uh, once developed that we don't repeat the mistakes that we just spent all this time, you know, uh, uh, learning ourselves out of, uh, or repeating the things that we unintentionally did not understand before. And now we do. So, how do we be better? Uh, but I think, uh, in doing those things, from the empathy to, uh, starting where you are, to, you know, building that, that camaraderie, uh, and, and, and working together to build those, uh, more accessible digital products, um, that's how you start. And you continue to iterate, uh, in those learnings. You continue to iterate. Which is not uncommon to the folks in this room, on the product in and of itself. And I think one part that we we don't normally talk about, but the post production. The post deployment, um, are, what is the feedback? Now we must keep an eye on that feedback. Now we must understand what are the tickets that are coming out. Because I'm gonna tell you something, if you're learning, you're probably producing crap. I'm just going to say it out loud. Okay, and that's just, that's a part of learning. You know, I'm not saying that to disparage anyone. But if you are learning, you're going to make mistakes. Right? So, now you must talk to your service people and say, listen, we put something out and, and, and we deployed something. We were trying child, okay? We were trying. We're doing our best. I need you to flag these tickets. Okay? I need you to flag the tickets that people are calling in and typing in and they're saying this, this is crap. Because we're going to get better from that, right? So it's the post deployment, as well, that you you start to focus more on as you're in this environment of learning. So, you can either iterate and get better.

**Soren Hamby:** I think I think you make a great point there, which brings up something I like to say a lot. Which is accessibility isn't a checklist and it's not a destination. You can't arrive at accessibility. It's a, it's like a workout. You got to constantly be practicing it.

And once you publish a page and it's accessible, guess what? There's another page tomorrow. There's new content. There's another app. It never ends. And that's, sometimes scary and sometimes wonderful. Because our job is never done. So, that's job security. But also, uh, you know, there's, there's always, there's always new challenges and new technology coming out, as well. So, as we start folding new technology and how do we do this for all this new technology when the metaverse comes in. Like, and AR and all this other stuff, how do we make these things accessible? And I mean, I don't have all the answers for that. But I want people to be helping me figure that out. So, that's why we need more people to be even just baseline knowledgeable about all these topics. So, that we can have people to collaborate with and say, hey, yeah, we're gonna help you figure this out. How can we make this accessible? Because it's impossible, like I said for us to memorize everything, or know everything, or anticipate everything. So, that's where that collaboration comes in. And just committing to being part of that journey and saying, yeah, we're not perfect. But we're, we're striking out on it. And I think that, that fear of failure sometimes holds people back from doing something really great.

**Mira Myllylä:** Do you have something to add Gopal?

**Gopal Mitra:** I think, um, it's fantastic. Yeah.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you.

All right, so we've talked about the motivation for accessibility and the reasons why we're here today and why we want to advocate the topic and got some tips, um, on how to cut information to smaller pieces, offer the education, build the empathy, um, educate people, understand better. Um, we're nearing the end, um, the end of the panel. So, I would like to hear in about 30 seconds, what is the main message that you would like the audience to take away from this discussion here today?

**E. Simone Jenerson:** Well, I think you heard a whole bunch. Uh, start where you are. Find your tribe. Do, iterate, again. Um, it's that simple. Um, yeah, that's it. Yeah, you said 30 seconds, that's it. Thank you.

**Soren Hamby:** I would say, um, accessibility has to become part of everything that you do. Um, people, processes, and your products and platforms. So, that's four P's. Uh, hopefully that'll be easy to remember. Uh, but, yeah, it's just gotta be part of everything. If it's part of the fabric, then it's, it's the outfit.

**Gopal Mitra:** Yeah. And, um. Just to compliment, uh, in the journey of accessibility, even small steps have, would have huge impact on the lives of many, many people, right? And the cost of exclusion is far higher than any investment in terms of time, energy, that is, that is done on accessibility.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you. You heard it.

Wow. This was inspiring. Thank you so much. I think next we are ready for the Q& A session. So, if you have questions and you're participating here in person, just raise your hand and Emma will come and pass the mic. And if you're participating remotely, you can post your questions to the chat and someone will read those from the chat.

**Audience Member 3:** Hi, sorry, I've lost my voice, so, thank goodness for this accessible technology. Um, there are product owners, I work in user experience, there are product owners who are empathy is hard for them. Um, but they definitely respond to money. And our, um, at my work, our accessibility director a few months ago shared a chart that proved the later in the process you involve accessibility, it gets exponentially more expensive, et cetera, et cetera. What are some resources, maybe some research or some sites that you might recommend that we can go to to show some hard numbers to, you know, bridge that conversation gap sometimes

**Soren Hamby:** Well, I mean, right off the top of my head, I don't have any sites in mind. But I can definitely put together some resources. I love doing that kind of stuff. So, I can do that. Um, just reach out to me on, on LinkedIn and I'll send it to you. Um, but I would say that there's a couple of different kind of like monetary incentives that can also be argued. Uh, and you can look at things like innovation, uh, different things that have been created for people with disabilities that are now huge innovation moneymakers. Like even just the Segway, uh, that personal mobility items have become, you know, multi million dollar markets. Um, that was created for people with disabilities. Siri, a voice assistant, uh, all of these things are created from technology that was for people with disabilities. So, I think there's, you know, there's many arguments. Uh, the cost of not including people with disabilities as, as Gopal said. Um, there's the innovation argument. There's the, the market share argument of, you know, we have so many people that have disabilities, uh, it depends on the country, but 15 to 20 percent of the general population. 37. 8 percent of the working population. Working population has money. So, if you're not building accessible technology, you're missing out on that money. Uh, and there's, you know, the right thing argument. There's the, we could get sued and lose money argument. So, I think tailoring that to what your PO's value and the kind of decisions that they already



make. So, if you know that they make decisions based on certain values and you can kind of like, dig a little into some decisions that they've made in the past. You can find out what's important to them and you can find out how to speak directly to what they value and what they will respond to.

**E. Simone Jenerson:** So if you find that they're risk averse, then the argument of losing money because you're sued may be more up their alley than say the other arguments that you mentioned.

**Soren Hamby:** Exactly.

**E. Simone Jenerson:** For example. Okay.

**Soren Hamby:** If somebody....

**Gopal Mitra:** Which motivation works.

**E. Simone Jenerson:** Yes.

**Soren Hamby:** Yeah. No, I was just gonna say if, if somebody's really motivated by risk and money then telling them it's the right thing to do is never gonna work.

**Mira Myllylä:** Something to add? Gopal or Simone?

**Gopal Mitra:** No, I think Simone and Soren spoke on behalf of all three of us. Laughter.

**Mira Myllylä:** So choose your strategy. Okay, next one.

**Audience Member 1:** Hey everybody. Thanks Reactor for bringing this panel together and thank all of you for, for educating us, uh, so much. Um, so when I think about designing for accessibility, um, there's an approach that I've heard of, I think about sort of work that Microsoft did about 10 years ago. Which is very much around the universalization of disability. So, an example would be, uh, a parent who's holding a baby doesn't have access to their arms. And so sort of, spreading the idea that all of us will experience a form of disability sometime in our lives or in our everyday lives. Um, and so I guess my question is, to what degree is, is that approach, do you think, helpful or I've heard hurtful to the, to, to, to advancing design for accessibility? And just to give some context, um, I design for a business unit that is focused on the military. So at least on the surface, almost none of my users have disabilities. I say on the

surface. But now they have disabilities. But of course they all use our products in very challenging environments, right? And so, yeah, I sort of want to know what you think about the universalization approach to design for disability.

**Gopal Mitra:** I think it's it's a really really foundational aspect that you have brought about. Accessible products, services are generally good products and services. As we see in so many walks of life, in, when we talk about education, we say a good teacher is an inclusive teacher. You know? Uh, we have had so many research that says if you, in fact, put a ramp, for example, of course it's for people who use wheelchairs. But research has shown that more and more pregnant women pushing up, uh...

uh, pregnant women, people pulling, uh, with strollers, uh, with suitcases, everyone, it's a large part of the population. Or the segment of the population that uses it. In addition, to persons with disability. So, it's absolutely right. A good product, an accessible product is overall a good product. And that's what, I mean, that's the basis of universal design, I think. That it's used, usable by a majority of people without any modification. And that's, I think, the basis of what we are talking today.

**E. Simone Jenerson:** Yeah, for sure. So that that's that's definitely the practicality and the basis or the basis of it. I think the practicality for, you know, getting to the heart of your question. So for you in particular, your your particular question, that's fun, because there's a population of people who, as you mentioned, do not either have a disability or whatever. When we think of this, I think we need to deconstruct a little bit disability. And where we may not see, there, there are, how I want to say this? There are invisible disabilities and cognitive disabilities. And even if they don't identify with those, um, at some point, you do right? Um, and I'd be interested to understand, you know, I don't know all the details, you know, if, if they're, uh, because of, I guess what they're doing, that they have to be in the toppest of shape and this, that other. But the challenging aspect of their jobs is, is hitting more into the temporary space of that universe at, universal design. Um, you know, it's the, what, god. My words are not coming. But in that temporary space that, that, that bar that talks about, you know, you're in a car, coffee shop. So it's it's too loud. Which means that you can't hear. It's that. So, that's the part I think you might want to hone in a little bit more on for the population in which, you know, that you're speaking of. But in the larger sense of the of the topic, uh, you know, they may not say and claim, you know, outwardly disability because that the population doesn't allow for that. That's not congratulated. It's not celebrated. It's like, no. But you know, uh, that you're still developing something for, for people who have all kinds of disabilities, seen and unseen.

**Soren Hamby:** Yeah, I, I'm just gonna follow that up with, I've actually been in your position. I worked for, as a subcontractor for the Department of Defense at the Joint Systems Integration Lab. And I was working on training products for pilots. And they were like, our pilots have perfect vision. None of them have disabilities. And I was like, that's great for you. Um, but as we did research and testing, we uncovered that there were several times where they were doing these huge exercises and they would have the pilots doing something completely different. And one of the products that we created was being operated by basically anyone in the building they could pull in a warm body to operate a machine. So you had janitors, you had cooks, you had maintenance workers sitting there operating these training softwares that we were creating. And so we found the use case. We were like, well, when you do these huge training days, like what about these people? And I think, you know, Simone's right about the coffee shop thing. Like, when you put somebody in a battle position. Or you put somebody in a really stressful position. Like, if you have somebody working on an oil rig. Like, all of these, like, really tough jobs where they say, like, oh, our people have perfect eyesight. They're, they have to be physically able. Yeah, but you put them under stress. Like, Why wouldn't you want to make it as cognitively easy to use as possible, or you have somebody that's an immigrant that doesn't speak English as a first language. Why wouldn't you want to make it easy to understand? I mean, like, there could be a miscommunication. Like the whole thing of like the Hawaii Missile Crisis might have been a miscommunication because UX was done. So it's just like, there's so many. Examples we can pull from to say, you know, you're not always right on that. Um, not everybody has a, a permanent disability, like you said. But sometimes these situations that you're putting people in that put them under stress can cause that temporary disability. Can cause them to have, you know, stress or anxiety. So I, I think, you know, that's also a good tack to take and to say, you know, even, even sometimes you can find the use case for it. So, uh, I think the universal design argument is great. I also am a real big fan of personalization. So, you know, what works for one person doesn't work for another. Like Gopal was saying, you know, some people have, uh, a visual disability. Some people have an auditory disability. Some people have both. So, something, like, I can't listen to my phone at full speed that some, like, some blind people do because I have a cognitive disability. And so I can't do that really fast speed of voiceover. I have to listen to it at, like, very normal speed. And I, I sometimes feel a little weird about that. Because I'm like, I'm not a power user, I guess. But you just have to be able to accommodate intersecting disabilities, as well.

**Emma Rocha:** Um, okay, I'm going to ask a question from someone that submitted virtually. Um, what research practices do you implement to identify areas in need of more accessible design solutions?

What research practices do you implement to identify areas in need of more accessible design solutions?

**Soren Hamby:** I'm going to keep mine short. Um, I think the best feedback comes from things like, uh, if you have a customer complaint, uh, having an accessibility statement on your website where people can reach out directly with accessibility complaints is a huge one. Uh, also just like setting up some interdepartmental lines of communication. Like, if you have a customer service department, how many issues are coming through there? Um, uh, that's that's one of the first things. Because customers will tell you

**E. Simone Jenerson:** Also think to your, your regular UX research methods that you're already doing. So generative research, um, usability, uh, testing, uh, all of those types of things are things you're already doing. Uh, if you are doing any kind of research. Um, it's just a matter of being intentional about, uh, developing your research questions. Uh, and keeping in mind who you want to include, uh, and, and all of that. So, it's, it's already what you're doing. Just having more focus on, on, on, accessibility. And or including those voices to, to get the feedback so you can make the, uh, inferences, uh, and, and find the gaps for accessibility.

**Gopal Mitra:** And just to add, uh, in couple of our, uh, programs, uh, in terms of digital products, uh, we, uh, we, after it's deployed or testing, um, from time to time, uh, we also reach out, uh, uh, again, because considering the diversity of disability, right?, uh, with different groups of of persons with disabilities, uh, to again, use and, and give us the experience. Because once in many times we have seen a product is or a digital product is accessible to one group of persons with disabilities. Not totally inaccessible to the other group and so on. So even, um, uh, it's, it's very important to, to continuously remind us of that fact. That this is a very, very diverse community. And, uh, yeah, we, and we have to be, make as much effort as possible to, to, to ensure that, uh, that, that it is accessible to all types of persons with disabilities. Yeah.

**Audience Member 2:** Hi, um, this is Monica. I head accessibility at CVS Health. So I heard your question and I just wanted, because this is something we have learned in the last year or so. One of the things I would encourage you to do, uh, when it comes to that is, to your point, Simone, it's, you know, You have to have people with disabilities on your design team. You're not, you know, you can do your research, uh, user research. You have organizations like FABLE. You've got National Federation for the Blind as an organization. They will become the voices. They will provide you insights from there. And Microsoft, um, has a great website for a lot of materials for accessibility that you will have.

And lastly, three things. The chief compliance officer in your organization, the chief diversity officer in your organization and head of your legal, those are the three people, if you don't have buy in from your own leadership, will give you the buy in you need. Because almost every organization has a legal challenge somewhere. Whether it's colleagues. Whether it's, um, consumers. Because you may or may not have a direct consumer, um, organization. I work for CVS. So, it's a retail organization as well as digital. So that was just, um, you know, I just thought, because I also had, um, co-lead lead accessibility at disability dot in. So these are a lot of the questions. So you'll find a lot of materials, a lot of training materials if anybody wants it from there. So I hope you guys, if you're starting small, Howard Johnson at, um, J& J started small. And she's doing great. So, you may reach out to her on LinkedIn as well. And she can help you out, as well.

**E. Simone Jenerson:** I love that. I want to just add one more thing there if, um, if you can't, because Fable is something that you can pay for and other things like that. So if, if you're, you know, we don't have resources. We talked about that. Okay. If you're in a company that has, uh, working groups. So, you know, moms, you know, of the company and, you know, African Americans and etc. They also typically, they'd have a disability group, as well. Tap into your peers, your colleagues that are part of that working group. And, and include them. Uh, ask first. Um, but include them, uh, along the way. Uh, and it's also a great place to, to showcase and to talk about, uh, what is happening. What you all, what you are doing and how, you know, you're trying to make that change in the company. I do want to say, though, if you're doing that, uh, please do not mine for information and not give back to said community. Please be careful about that. Be courteous about that. We are sharing, not mining. But that's also a resource to, uh, to tap into that's free. But does require clearly, uh, the work of communication and partnership and relationship building. So, um, that's another one. Thank you so much for, um, for that.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you. One more thing to add or?

**Soren Hamby:** Yeah, it's very short. I just wanted to add on to what you said and say that a lot of people feel uncomfortable asking their customers, hey, do you have a disability? Don't ask about disability. Ask about the assistive tech they use. Do you use assistive tech? Do you use voiceover? Do you use a screen reader? Do you navigate the web using a keyboard? So questions like that can help your user research tap in to make sure that you have people with disabilities in your testing group from just your regular customer base. Then you don't have to go to an outside company and get like a specialty, uh, disability testing group or anything like that. You can just source from the customers you

already have in your testing groups. But you're just making sure that you get a diverse group of candidates. And there's nothing wrong with testing mostly with people with disabilities because people without disabilities can use the same technology. So build it once, build it right.

**Mira Myllylä:** Thank you. Okay. Thank you so much, Simone. Soren, Gopal. This has been a blast. And we can maybe continue later with the drinks. But thank you everyone for joining and listening the past hour.

It's been very inspiring. Thank you.