Accessibility & Compliance
A practical explainer for industry practitioners

This document provides a clear, practical introduction to accessibility and inclusive design for digital teams. It explains key concepts such as Universal Design, WCAG, and EU accessibility legislation, and clarifies what compliance means in day-to-day practice. The explainer highlights the shared responsibilities of UX teams and developers, helping organisations move beyond minimum compliance toward more inclusive and sustainable digital products.

Reading time: 9 minutes

Key takeaways:

- Accessibility is a legal requirement — inclusive design is a strategic advantage
- WCAG and EU legislation provide the baseline
- Universal Design helps teams think beyond minimum compliance
- Tools help, but people matter more
- Co-design supports better, more inclusive digital outcomes

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1. Why this matters

Accessibility and inclusion are no longer optional “nice-to-haves”. Across Europe and beyond, digital products and services must be usable by everyone, including people with disabilities. Poorly designed technology can exclude users, expose organisations to legal risk, and damage trust. Inclusive and accessible design:

- improves usability for *all* users
- reduces costly rework
- helps organisations meet legal and ethical responsibilities
- supports innovation and business growth

1. Accessibility vs Inclusive Design (quick clarification)

Accessibility focuses on removing barriers so people with disabilities can use a product or service.

Inclusive design goes further:

- it designs *from the start* for human diversity
- it recognises different abilities, contexts, languages, and experiences
- it benefits everyone, not only people with disabilities (the “curb-cut effect”)

Good practice combines both.

2. Universal Design: the foundation

Universal Design asks a simple question: *Does this design work for the widest possible range of people?*

If a design creates barriers for some users, those barriers should be removed.

The 7 Universal Design principles

Digital products and services should aim to be:

1. **Equitable in use** – useful to people with diverse abilities
2. **Flexible in use** – adaptable to different preferences and needs
3. **Simple and intuitive** – easy to understand
4. **Perceptible** – information is clear regardless of sensory ability
5. **Tolerant of error** – mistakes don’t cause harm
6. **Low effort** – usable without fatigue
7. **Appropriate in size and space** – works across devices and contexts

3. Accessibility standards: what teams need to know

WCAG – Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

WCAG is the global standard for digital accessibility. It is built around four core principles, known as **POUR**:

- **Perceivable** – users can perceive the information
- **Operable** – users can interact with the interface
- **Understandable** – content and interactions make sense
- **Robust** – works with current and future technologies, including assistive tools

Most legislation references WCAG 2.1 or 2.2, typically at Level AA.

4. What this means for UX teams vs developers

While accessibility and compliance are shared responsibilities, they show up differently in daily work. UX and design teams are responsible for shaping *how inclusion is designed in* from the start: researching with diverse users, applying Universal Design principles, creating clear and flexible interfaces, and ensuring that accessibility is considered in flows, content, and interaction patterns—not added later as a fix. Developers, on the other hand, are responsible for *making those designs real and robust*: implementing semantic code, keyboard support, screen-reader compatibility, correct ARIA usage, error handling, and ensuring the product meets WCAG requirements in practice. Compliance fails when either side works in isolation. Inclusive digital products emerge when UX teams and developers collaborate closely, share responsibility, and treat accessibility as a core quality attribute—just like performance or security.

Accessibility & Inclusion in Practice - UX Teams vs Developers

Topic	UX & Design Teams	Developers & Engineers
Role in accessibility	Shape inclusion early by embedding accessibility into research, concepts, and interaction design	Make accessibility real by implementing it correctly and consistently in code
User involvement	Engage diverse users and people with lived experience throughout design	Support testing with assistive technologies and real usage scenarios
Universal Design	Apply Universal Design principles to layouts, flows, content, and interaction patterns	Ensure designs remain usable across devices, inputs, and assistive tools
Information clarity	Design clear hierarchy, readable content, and predictable navigation	Implement semantic structure so information is correctly exposed to assistive tech
Interaction & control	Design interactions that work without precision, speed, or memory load	Implement full keyboard support, focus management, and operable controls
Error handling	Anticipate mistakes and design forgiving, understandable feedback	Build tolerant systems with clear error messages and safe recovery paths
Accessibility standards	Design with WCAG and POUR principles in mind	Ensure WCAG requirements are technically met and testable
Tools & testing	Use accessibility tools to inform and validate design decisions	Use automated and manual testing tools to verify compliance
Handover & documentation	Clearly document accessibility intent and design decisions	Translate intent into accessible components and maintain them over time
Shared responsibility	Collaborate continuously with developers and stakeholders	Collaborate continuously with designers and stakeholders

5. EU accessibility legislation

EU Web Accessibility Directive (2016)

Applies mainly to public sector websites and mobile apps.

Requires organisations to:

- make content accessible
- publish an accessibility statement
- provide a feedback mechanism
- respond to reported issues

European Accessibility Act (EAA) – in force from June 2025

The EAA extends accessibility requirements into the private sector.

It applies to products and services such as:

- e-commerce websites and apps
- online banking and payment systems
- transport booking systems
- e-books and e-readers
- ATMs, kiosks, and self-service terminals

The Act focuses on anticipatory accessibility — designing accessibility in from the beginning, not reacting later.

6. What compliance means in practice

For most digital teams, compliance involves:

- meeting WCAG requirements
- documenting accessibility (e.g. accessibility statements)
- testing with assistive technologies
- addressing accessibility issues as part of normal development cycles

But compliance alone is not enough.

7. Why tools are helpful — but not sufficient

Automated tools can:

- identify common accessibility issues
- highlight missing alt text or contrast problems
- support early testing

However, tools cannot fully represent real user experience.

To truly understand accessibility and inclusion you need to engage with users, including people with lived experience of disability.

8. Moving beyond compliance: co-design for inclusion

Inclusive digital products are created when:

- users are involved early and throughout the lifecycle
- assumptions are challenged
- diverse perspectives inform decisions

Co-design supports this by bringing together:

- lived experience
- professional expertise
- organisational knowledge

This approach reduces exclusion, improves outcomes, and leads to more robust, future-proof solutions.

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