Questions to Gain the Right Insights for Accessible Procurement (& How to Pair them with IT Security Risk Assessments)

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full project writeup and details:
Asking the Right Questions for Procuring Inclusive, Accessible Technology
Kyle Shachmut in *EDUCAUSE Review*
October 26, 2021

Introduction

Postsecondary institutions have obligations to ensure the accessibility of electronic content, especially content purchased from third parties. Higher education accessibility experts from fifteen colleges and universities synthesized best practices across many institutions. The resulting assessment questions for vendors were incorporated into the 2021 updates to the Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment Toolkit (HECVAT), a widely used tool that previously focused on assessing risk for security compliance. The HECVAT is maintained and supported in partnership with volunteers from Educause, Internet2 and REN-ISAC.

About the HECVAT

- Shared framework of questions to assess vendor products for IT Security & Privacy standards
- Adopted by hundreds of postsecondary institutions
- Streamlines vendor processes because they can complete the assessment about their product and make it available in a database for any prospective customer institution
- Incorporates measures beyond technical standards in +/- 90 questions
- Toolkit is released as a spreadsheet with automated scoring & ability to supplement notes
- There are 'Lite' and 'full' versions used for common assessments and those requiring higher sensitivity like credit card processing systems (both include accessibility questions)

How the Questions were Developed

- Hundreds of higher ed accessibility expert practitioners reviewed, shared submitted questions
- Voted on by IT Accessibility Community Group (CG) members
- 15 member expert working group discussed, deliberated, and decided
- Selected question phrasing and refined for clarity and continuity with the HECVAT core team

Questions to Ask Vendors

HECVAT scoring constrained questions to be asked in a yes / no format, needing to add a limited number of questions to achieve project objectives. Below are four sets of questions grouped thematically followed by the questions labeled as they appear in the HECVAT rubric.

A knowledge Accessibility Contact

Time is often wasted and accuracy lost when accessibility information is exclusively conveyed through an account executive or relationship manager who is not well versed in accessibility.

- **Questions GENL 11 through 13** ask for the name, title, and contact information for the most appropriate accessibility contact for the product under consideration.

Product Conformance for Accessibility Standards

Conformance to technical standards is critical using widely available reporting formats. When products do not conform, available information about roadmaps is useful to effectively plan for enterprise adoption.

- **DOCU-12:** Has a VPAT or ACR been created or updated for the product and version under consideration within the past year?
- **ITAC-01:** Has a third-party accessibility expert conducted an accessibility audit of the most recent version of your product?
- **ITAC-02:** Do you have a documented and implemented process for verifying accessibility conformance?
- **ITAC-03:** Have you adopted a technical or legal accessibility standard of conformance for the product in question?
- **ITAC-04:** Can you provide a current, detailed accessibility roadmap with delivery timelines

Organizational Maturity Toward Accessibility

Enterprise customers like education institutions need an understanding of organizational maturity toward accessibility to determine with confidence if a provider can maintain accessible products and close any gaps that exist over time. Vendors that consistently release new products features and then later "fix" accessibility undercut any public commitment they may have to building inclusive products.

- **ITAC-05:** Do you expect your staff to maintain a current skill set in IT accessibility?

- **ITAC-06:** Do you have a documented and implemented process for reporting and tracking accessibility issues?
- **ITAC-07:** Do you have documented processes and procedures for implementing accessibility into your development lifecycle?

Accessibility via User Experience, Support, and Documentation

Beyond standards conformance, true accessibility is is determined by the user experience of a product's customers. Likewise, vendors often state that accessibility is dependent on the settings or themes of a product, if accessibility is dependent on such settings, it is important that be disclosed and documented for institutional product owners.

- **ITAC-08:** Can all functions of the application or service be performed using only the keyboard?
- **ITAC-09:** Does your product rely on activating a special "accessibility mode," a "lite version," or accessing an alternate interface for accessibility purposes?
- **DOCU-13:** Do you have documentation to support the accessibility features of your product?

The Path Ahead

The HECVAT is maintained by a consortium of interested community members and revised on an annual (typically late calendar year) release cycle. Ongoing collaborations between HECVAT maintainers and the EDUCAUSE IT Accessibility Community group should help refine questions over time and keep assessment criteria responsive to institutional and vendor needs into the future.

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