Accessibility and an Exceptional Customer Experience

Transcript

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[bright music]

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[Jay Wyant]

Welcome, everyone. This is Jay Wyant from the state of Minnesota. I'm the Chief Information Accessibility Officer, and we are beginning our event, Breaking Barriers: What does accessibility have to do with exceptional customer experience? And I'm very happy to have a number of guests here with us.

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First, I want to announce that Governor Walz has issued a proclamation declaring today, May 16, to be Global Accessibility Day--Digital Accessibility Day, sorry, for the state of Minnesota. And we're so happy to have that proclamation, and we're so happy to have the support of the governor and his office and everyone else with us today.

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So with that, I'm going to stop sharing my screen, and we're going to go with all the folks in the presentation. So again, thank you, everyone, for being here. I introduced myself, but very briefly. I'm Jay Wyant, chief information accessibility officer. I have a shaved head. I have glasses, dress shirt, and I have a banner behind me saying G-A-A-D, or GAAD--for my background. I'm so happy we had that. And I want to welcome everyone here. So we're going to have all the panelists introduce themselves, and then we'll go into the fun part of it. So first, Jane.

00:01:25:17

[Jane Davison]

Hi, good afternoon, everyone. This is Jane Davison. I'm super excited to be here on this panel today. My title is actually supervisor of the Digital Experience Design Team for MNIT partnering with DHS and MNsure. Jay was awesome and promoted me to UX director in some of the promotions for today's event, but I'm actually a

supervisor and leading from my position with a great team. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a white woman in my 50s with long hair. And we'll pass it--oh, I'm wearing a red shirt. And I will pass it on to Susan.

00:02:02:05

[Susan Ramlet]

Thank you, Jane. This is Susan Ramlet. My pronouns are she and her. I have straight, brown, shoulder-length hair. I'm also wearing glasses so I can see some lovely faces. I'm calling in from Medtronic, where I lead the User Experience Research and Design Team within global IT. We focus on designing enterprise software for employees, patients, customers, and partners of Medtronic. I also serve on the Technology Advisory Council for the state of Minnesota, which is how I met Jay, as I co-chair a subcommittee around customer experience. And I'll turn it over to John.

00:02:41:13

[John Mumma]

Yeah, good afternoon, everyone. My name is John Mumma. I have brown hair--pretty short--tan sweater I'm wearing today, glasses. And, yeah, I'm really excited to be here this afternoon with everyone as well. I joined the state about two years ago. I work in MNIT, which is our IT services, a small group over there called the Office of Transformation. And for the last--I don't know--year and a half, almost two years, we've been building out the product and agile practices here at the state. So excited to be on the panel and excited to tackle these subjects with everyone. Thank you.

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Thank you, everyone. So I'm going to start with a brief introduction, then we can ask some really good questions, and it'll be interesting to look forward to everyone's responses. So first, I want to point out that the governor's One Minnesota Plan say, quote, "Customer experience "refers to how Minnesota residents feel "and what they think when they use government services," unquote. The goal is that, quote, "The state of Minnesota provides a high-quality customer experience," unquote, with an incremental goal that the state will, by 2027, increase the number of new or improved digital self-service offerings from across its enterprise to 40 offerings, all with a focus on customer experience.

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At the Office of Accessibility where I work, we know that ensuring all websites, applications, and documents are accessible improves the experience of those who interact with our services. From our viewpoint, that should be the floor, where things start. Customer experience is much greater than that. So you want to explore the concept of customer experience and ultimately, see how things like accessibility fit into it. So we have a panel of experts who bring a diverse set of knowledge and experience to that world again, to the table. We'll start by having them introduce themselves, which we just did, and then we'll get right into conversation about customer experience. So I'm going to talk with Jane.

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Jane, there have been a lot of overlapping buzzwords over the past decade, including "design thinking," "UX, or User Experience," "human-centered design"--and yesterday we held a great panel on that topic with Jane--and of course, "digital accessibility." How does customer experience, or CX, fit into all of this?

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[Jane Davison]

This is Jane--so love this question. It's a great place for us to kind of level set with the term "customer experience." And I know sometimes in the government sector, maybe the term "customer" is not always comfortable for us to use or to think about, but that's really the umbrella term under which kind of all these other buzzwords kind of exist. And I love that you refer to them as buzzwords because they probably are for a lot of people. They've certainly not been buzzwords for practitioners who've been doing user experience design and human-centered design, things like that for many, many years or even many decades. But as this type of work becomes more and more critical and important to really improving the experience of all the people that want to use and access your services, these kind of terms get picked up by other disciplines--you know, architecture, business analysis, many spaces like product and agile, where these terms start to creep in and become useful in all of these other affinity disciplines.

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So I do have a slide, and I'm not sure if I can just pop it into the chat for you or if I should show it, but I think I'll just try popping it into the chat and see if it works that way, but if not, I can follow up with people after the event to provide those definitions, but there is some alphabet soup. There's UX. There's CX. There's IA for information architecture, UI for user interaction, also, user interface design. So you'll see a lot of different terms. But ultimately, we do want to think about them as sort of living under CX. And I'm going to pop the slide, I think, into the chat. If I just copy and paste, it's pretty large.

00:07:16:02

[Jay Wyant]

And Susan has her hand up.

00:07:21:07

[Susan Ramlet]

Yeah, I love that, Jane. I--one thing that I wanted to also touch on--we've had a similar conversation about is CX part of--like, how do these things fit together? And I actually kind of like the idea of starting with accessibility because if you can't access the thing, there's no experience. So it really has to start there. Even though it all falls under the customer experience label, I think you really have to start with accessibility, or you're excluding a large part of your--of your audience.

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[Jane Davison]

This is Jane. And one thing I would--I would agree with that. When I first started here, I was an old-school graphic designer. I was working in communications on a legacy system. And we were learning about accessibility and plain language and how to make these user experiences better just from even those baseline things, and as I was learning more and more about accessibility, I found that I couldn't get traction with a lot of people to do accessibility unless we really spoke to the usability piece of things and that good customer experience. And once people could connect the dots between all of those things, then we started to get traction, and we really started to be more effective in making more substantive improvements for folks.

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So I will go ahead and hit Send on the slide. And if you can't read it, let me know, and I will follow up with you.

00:08:51:19

[Jay Wyant]

Thank you, Jane. Anybody else want to respond? OK, we'll move on to the next one. It's a segue. I'm going to ask John. John, you know, you said that you're working in the product and agile field, so this will be a great question for you. The state is in the middle of a shift toward adopting a product mindset. Can you tell us how this translates to customer experience?

00:09:16:21

[John Mumma]

Yeah, sure, Jay, and really appreciate and love the question. So as Jay mentioned, my team is responsible for working with agencies and helping them adapt product and agile, but we don't lead with that, right? We start with customer experience. That's the first thing we do. We want to talk to people why customers experience, the benefits it has not just for the people that we serve--and that be residents, businesses, visitors, et cetera. But it also has a ripple effect on staff that are involved in delivering these services, right?

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And then also when we talk about customer experience, we start out a little bit broad. And, you know, within there, we think of, you know, user experience falls within there. Staff experience falls within there. But we still-- again, we want to start out broad, and then as we work through these different products and services, we'll start getting a little bit more granular. And they're all interconnected, if you will, right?

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So we work for the state. A lot of times, the people that we interact with, like businesses that we grant licenses to and stuff, they're not necessarily the ultimate end beneficiary, right? It's the public. One of the teams we work with, they issue licenses to local retail establishments that serve, like, food and beverages, right? Well, the goal of these licenses is to make sure that the establishments are producing this food in a clean, safe environment so folks won't get sick, right? Well, our direct interaction is with the users, who would be the businesses. The ultimate end beneficiary is going to be the consumers who consume the food and beverages.

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Another thing about this whole customer experience mindset is that we want to let folks know that this does include staff as well, and the example that I always like to give is, like, everyone can relate to this, I think. You know, you've gone into restaurants where the crew that's working there, maybe they're having a bad day, right? So when you go into a restaurant, and maybe your server is having a bad day, you're probably going to have a bad experience and walk out of there, but if you go into a restaurant, and you have a great experience--or I'm sorry--your staff is in, like, really good mood, you're more bound to have, like, a great experience, a positive experience on it. So there's a connection between the customer experience as well as, you know, staff and user experience on all this. And then other studies show that some of the ways to create the best customer experience is actually to focus starting with the internal staff experience as well.

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So again, they're all interconnected. As far as our movement to product, then we start talking about, OK, customer experience is the focal point. This is what we want to improve. How do we get there? And that's where we start introducing concepts around product and concepts around agile. But we're focused on the ultimate outcome, which is that improved customer experience, improved user experience, improved staff experience. And then we start to, you know, kind of weave in, like, these are the approaches and the tools we have in our toolbox to achieve those goals. So not sure if anyone else has thoughts on that.

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[Jay Wyant]

Thank you, John. Jane, Susan, any thoughts you want to share? Go ahead, Susan.

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[Susan Ramlet]

Yeah, thanks, Jay. This is Susan. John, thank you for that, and for mentioning agile. I think one of the things that I've always really appreciated about agile is that it defines work in the context of user stories. And the word "user" is in there, and that can be defined in a lot of different ways. But the idea is, there's no real purpose to doing something unless it benefits a user. And so I like that in product models, that's often the way that the work is looked at, and valued, and judged, and measured. So I think there is a real affinity between agile, which supports the product model and the customer experience and UX tactics and techniques that we use.

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[Jane Davison]

And if I--

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[Jay Wyant]

Go ahead, Jane.

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[Jane Davison]

This is Jane--if I could add to that as well. One of the things I've really appreciated about the Pace team is the way that they've certainly reached out to the practitioners at the state who have been trying to, you know, raise awareness around good usability, good accessibility, inclusive design, and brought us into that conversation, and into that fold very early on. And then that--you know, some of the methods of product, especially around understanding who is your customer, who is your user, being able to speak about that through the use of personas, good user research, and ultimately, engaging with those folks to have them participating either in the design process or feedback on your prototypes and things like that.

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You know, the product method, product and agile methods really provided us with some additional tools to kind of really ground ourselves that way. And so I really appreciate what product and agile has done for us, and certainly, allowing us to speak more about empathy and what that really means to improving the customer experience. And I'll throw another little slide into the chat related to empathy and equity. We've seen this illustration a million times over, but it really does address that when we think about the customer we serve, and especially if that individual has a disability of some sort, if we're inclusive of those needs in the way we develop products and then deliver them in an agile manner, their needs are incorporated. They're included in the way we address the solution or build the solution.

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[John Mumma]

Yeah, that's a great point, Jane, right, because--going back to the question that you shared with us, Jay, is that at the end of the day, customer experience is all about getting out there, and talking to your customers, and finding out what their expectations are, what works for them and everything. And that's a big mind shift change for people, right, because we're so used to an inside-out perspective versus an outside-in. And you'll notice, like, people that are on this journey, sometimes they get trapped, and they fall backwards or something, right? And you can always tell, like, when you're working with new teams, they want to talk about, like, well, I cranked out a hundred licenses this month, right? But we're trying to get them more focused on the output and stuff, but we don't know what, necessarily, those outputs and what our customers value until we do some of that hard work where we get out there, and we talk to our customers, and we start asking them, like, "Hey, here's our product or service. "You know, tell us what you like and what you don't like. "What are the pain points? "What are the jobs that you're trying to accomplish by using our products and services?" So yeah, I was just going back to your original question, Jay. I mean, everything we do is geared around, you know, how do we start moving people from an inside-out perspective to an outside-in perspective.

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[Jay Wyant]

Thank you. Thank you all for that, and I want to ask a follow-up question on that as well. John, I think you made a very good point. OK, let's say we think the customer, it may be the person coming into the restaurant, all right? So what we may be doing here at the state of Minnesota is helping the staff complete the licensing, make sure they're doing all the things they need to do to provide a safe environment to the restaurant. That's in order to ensure that the customer has a safe, clean, healthy environment, but you also pointed out that the customer experience is not just them, but all the things that lead up to that. So we want to have a good customer experience for the staff working to complete this so that they are happy and positive, and then therefore, have a good customer experience to the end customer. So that raising a question sometimes called minimum viable product, or MVP. And how would you think about how do you bring an MVP? We talk about things like, what's the floor? What's the basis? What the minimum that you have to make sure we have a good MVP?

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[John Mumma]

Yeah, so I've got a couple of thoughts, and then I'll share. So MVP--what's the word I'm looking for? MVP is great, right, because you put out MVPs based on feedback you get from your--or you put out MVP so you can get feedback and stuff from your customers, and you can tweak and adjust and everything. But what I think about when we start talking about MVPs is a lot of teams that we work with, we run into, they're like, hey, we already know what our customers want. We've got 5, 10, 15, 20 years of complaints piling up in our Excel sheets, right? So we know what our customers want.

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The problem is, and I think studies, you know, come to this conclusion, and I've seen it out there, is that people are really good at telling you what they don't like, but they're really bad at telling you what they do like. So that's why MVPs are so critical, right? You spend a little bit of time, you build something, you put it into your customers' hands, and you get that feedback. And again, that's also obviously way different than taking a project mindset where you go away, you build everything, and then you get to the end and you say, hey, what do you think, right? And it's not just theory, because we work with teams, and we've seen this. We've seen teams go out. They're like, "Hey, I've got five years' worth of complaints." I know what they don't like about these forms. They'll go away. They'll spend six months working on the forms, and then they'll roll them out to their customers, expecting big hugs and everything, and then they're really disappointed after they spent all this time because they're focused on what folks don't like, and they're interpreting it and thinking they know what their customers want based upon the negative feedback.

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So long way to get to your point about MVPs, Jay, but I'm just trying to share why MVPs are so critical in this space, right? Again, it's because people can tell us what they don't like, but they have a really hard time telling us what they do like until you put something in front of them, so.

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[Jay Wyant]

Hey John, that's a great example about the complaint and trying to figure out don't like versus do like. Susan, Jane, do you have any comments to add to that? Susan, you're up.

00:19:38:11

[Susan Ramlet]

Yeah, I appreciate that, John, so much. And you know, one of the examples that I--I mean, from my business is, we serve health care professionals who then supply products, and services, and solutions--and, you know, not solutions, but therapies to our patients. And so sometimes we interact with patients directly, and sometimes we don't. And that's your example of the making the workers happy so that they can make other people happy, which is--which is really great. I think for the MVP example that you give as well about not always looking at positive feedback, I think that's very, very important. And one of the things we like to focus on on my team as we're looking at interviewing people or getting user feedback is, what works well that we shouldn't break? We need to really understand what is working well because as you say, it's easy to complain about things, but we don't want to break the things that really are working well, and we need to make sure we do our due diligence to understand what those things are as well.

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[Jay Wyant]

Excellent point, thanks for sharing.

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OK, Jane.

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[Jane Davison]

Yeah, this is Jane, and I wanted to add in that lately, we've been on our team kind of playing around with the concept of not only minimally viable product, but also minimally viable prototype. Prototyping is not something that we tend to do a lot of, and we tend to not maybe test those a lot with end users. It's still kind of unbroken ground for us a little bit within state government. But it's really important because if you can start prototyping early and testing those prototypes with people, you will get some of those learnings in place so that by the time you release the MVP and, you know, out into the real world, it's already received the benefit of some input. And I know you can't always do that all the time, but there are times when it's really important. And then also tying that minimally viable sort of definition of "done" for an initial release versus, you know, maybe the vision that you have for an end product. We've also been trying to work a lot on socializing not only KPIs, good, you know, OKRs and KPIs, but also really understanding what are the user outcomes that you are driving toward with the release of whatever it is that you're building. And if those user outcomes are really to improve access to something, and maybe part of that improving access is to simply make a PDF that wasn't accessible before, now it's accessible. Or maybe, you know, providing a mobile screen that's much easier to use, you know, and then being able to test that with people with disabilities, or all different kinds of abilities--those are the things that

you can do in that prototyping stage that then generates a really good result when you finally get that MVP out the door.

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[Jay Wyant]

Thank you, Jane. I think we may talk a little bit more about this later after we answer some other--go through some other things. So I'm going to lead on to the next question and then give us some room maybe to go back if we need to. So, Jane, you're next. No, I'm sorry, Susan. I apologize for that. You bring an outside perspective working for a corporation. As you know from your involvement on the Technology Advisory Committee, or TAC, the state depend on vendors for a lot of our technology. What can we at government do to get vendors to support our customer experience goals?

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[Susan Ramlet]

Thank you, Jay. This is Susan. That's a super interesting question for me. As part of the TAC--we call it the TAC, the Technology Advisory Council--I do see a lot of parallels in MNIT and my private-sector IT experience, where we have gaps in concrete ways to hold vendors accountable for delivering usable and accessible experiences. It's very, very similar. And this is an area that we're focusing on in my organization as well, so a lot of parallels.

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I think there are--I think there are three facets or three areas where we can raise the bar, at least where we're trying to in my organization. One is our internal mindset. One is documentation, to just get super tactical about it. And one is validation. And those are some different sort of facets, but I can share a little bit of an example of some of those things. So from an internal mindset perspective, making sure that our internal teams are starting with the persona, with the end user in mind--as we've been talking--building that mindset with training. And even something that we're working on in some areas within IT is encouraging goal-setting. I'm not sure if as employees you have annual goals that you set for your performance. We do, and we're asking people to set goals around this so that they are owning the, you know, the mindset, building the mindset, taking the training, doing the things they need to do, including--so from a documentation perspective--including customer experience and accessibility requirements in our RFPs and in our vendor things. I know the state does this already to a good extent. We don't. And that's an area that we have a gap. But I think that documentation is really important in making sure that people understand clearly the requirements and the expectations.

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I think that also means requirements--business analysts putting requirements in that say, the system needs to conform with this, or this is what usability looks like. This is what a good experience looks like. This is how we're going to measure it. I think that has to be documented, and communicated, and clearly understood. You know, historically speaking--and Jane may laugh at this--in IT, what we've seen as requirements for usability typically takes the form of "the system shall be user friendly." And, you know, how do you define that? How do you measure that? What does that mean? There are ways to do it, but people just don't know how. And so one of

our objectives has been to encourage good documentation practices and helping people to understand, well, how can you take some industry heuristics, and measure those, and put systems up against those?

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I think that then from a validation, which is sort of that third facet, we need to obviously be asking vendors for VPATs, for certification, for the things that they do that, you know, confirm and verify that they're--or assert that their systems are conformant. We all know that they aren't always. And so I like to say "trust but verify." You know, we need to gather that documentation from them and ask for that validation, but we also need to do a little bit of our own due diligence to make sure that they really are doing what they say, that they're not, for example, providing an accessibility overlay, which may not be an acceptable solution for accessibility in what we're trying to do. And so, you know, where technically they may be conformant with--they may be making their tool accessible, that doesn't meet what we're trying to do. And so we have to be really careful about validating. And I think for those of us with really small teams--mine is much smaller than yours--it's really hard. It's very hard to manage this work. And so finding ways that we can encourage cultural change and get everybody on board with, hey, this is all of us. This is the way we need to work. This is the way we need to think. So I think that's how we've been trying to approach it from kind of those three facets as we get going in this area.

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[Jay Wyant]

Susan, that was a great overview. John, Jane, would either of you like to make a comment on that?

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[John Mumma]

Yeah, I mean, it's a big area. It's a big question, Jay, right? I think I'm going to go a little bit off tangent, possibly, but it's because I've had so many of these conversations lately, and I'll come back to the question, I hope. A lot of times, folks get into this impression that, you know, because we work with vendors and everything, we can kind of push off a lot of that work onto the vendors. Or because we work with vendors, we can't do this type of work. And that's what I'm wrestling with a lot of times right now. Like, well, we're working with vendors, so we can't do accessibility, and we can't do customer experience and everything. But what we try to tell folks is that customer experience and accessibility should all be done up front before you even worry about which vendor to work with.

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I mean, that's really it at the end of the day. That work that we do up front should drive the vendor selection and everything. And that's why it's really important for us to build a lot of these skills in-house, right? We already got staff all over the state that really, really know their customers, their users, their community partners, and all that. So they've got a lot of that business, and context, and everything. We've just got to make space so that we can have folks go out and spend more time with their customers and their users, and getting feedback, and asking those questions, and throwing MVPs out there, and getting feedback on it.

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So that's kind of the way I look at this, Jay. I think I'm answering the question in the spirit that it was asked, but these are a lot of conversations that we're having right now. Folks will come to us and like, hey, we're working with a vendor. You know, we can't do accessibility. We can't do customer experience. I'm like, "No, you should actually probably do "that before you even worry about which vendor or which technology to use." So those are my thoughts on it.

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[Jay Wyant]

Thank you, John. Susan, I see you might have a response as well.

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[Susan Ramlet]

I do. John, you absolutely answered that right on. One of the focus areas that we've had on our team is, how do we encourage people to include my team in solution selection activities? So it is that RFP. It's that early on process. And you know, the--realistically, when we think about enterprise software, some of this stuff is stuff that we need to get our jobs done. And it's not always going to be delightful. It's not always going to be accessible. It just isn't. But we need to make the best choice that we can. And we have to realize that any accommodation we make for usability or accessibility is going to fall on us, and so we need to at least be having those conversations and set expectations.

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And also, the work that we do in UX that isn't design, which is a lot of what we're talking about--we aren't designing these third-party solutions--a lot of that work can be used as data to inform organizational change management. It can also be used as data for contract negotiations. So if we're working with vendors and before we sign a contract, we can say, hey, we did a usability study, and these are some problems that we identified. How are you going to mitigate these? Put them on your roadmap. So we can move the bar in a positive direction and start to have those conversations.

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It's never going to be 100%, but let's always do better and let people know what those expectations are. So again, you know, the more we get this in upfront, to your point, John, absolutely, that can provide--you know, at a minimum, we can't change a line of code, but we can identify usability issues that can inform how we train our users. We can inform how we write support articles, knowledge articles for our support people. And having that data ahead of time is better than finding it out later.

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There's a really great quote. And if anybody of you--if anyone knows who said it, I will give attribution because it wasn't me. But it's a UX professional who said, "Users "will test your software. You decide if it's before launch or after launch."

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[Jay Wyant]

Yeah, that's fantastic quote, fantastic update to what John was saying. Anybody else want to add on any more to that?

00:32:21:05

[Jane Davison]

This is Jane. I feel like there's not much to add. I mean, I really appreciate what John--I like that you just stepped into the reality of these conversations that we're having right now, and just being honest about that is really, really what we need. And, you know, I think that I've had a couple--we're kind of experiencing some similar stuff on our side as well, and I've gotten to the point, too, where, you know, I have a lot of empathy for our leaders who are not practitioners in accessibility, not practitioners in UX design, maybe haven't, you know, come up through the ranks as an analyst, but maybe they did something else. And that's not a knock on their skills. But you will have vendors that will profit off of exploiting your knowledge gap versus having vendors that really are a good partner with you. But that does require us on the inside to come with a good game plan, a good strategy, solid expectations. So, Susan, I really love what you said about, like, hey, we did the usability study. We've done some research, and here's what we're looking for in the solution, and then, you know, having them demo that and bring that to you. Because at the end of the day, we are sitting in quite a bit of affluence when it comes to dollars on these contracts. And so really leveraging those dollars, that is your power. And really advocating for accessibility and good usability through those contracts is key. And then, you know, we're also looking at, too, how a design system can be leveraged to improve accessibility and user experience.

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A lot of times with vendors, you know, I'll hear, hey, Jane, yeah, we'll take your wireframes, but we're not really going to--you know, we're going to ta--I literally had someone say this to me. It's been a few years ago, but they're like, we're going to take your team's wireframes, and we're going to throw them away because we're working with a UI, a native UI, in the solution and the cost product that we already bought. And it's fragile. We don't want to configure it too much, blah, blah, blah. And so what happens when you let the native UI dictate the look and feel, and the usability, and that customer experience of using that product, and you don't ask that UI to conform to your standards, that's a missed opportunity right there. So we have a little bit of work to do in terms of getting good design, and style guidance, and good accessibility baked into components and design systems that we use first, and then we can use those with vendors to kind of see, how far can they come to meet us in that space.

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[Jay Wyant]

Jane, I love that response, Jane, and I think everybody here is making a great point that--this is Jay Wyant speaking--but a great point that every vendor we work with, it could be our partner. They're part of a relationship that we're going to build with them. Maybe a short or long-term relationship, but most likely longer term because once you buy or start using something, you're going to be there for a while. So we need them--not only, Jane, are they willing to work with us to be better, but more importantly, are they even able to work with us to make it better? Do they have--if they're working with legacy software, they might have the best of intentions, but there's only so far they can go with it, as opposed to somebody using more updated or current software and technology, and they can actually continue to improve on it. And we can then work with them on that. So great point, everyone. So it's on us to know, who are we buying from, who are you working with, before we could even make that agreement to them. Go ahead, Jane.

00:35:49:11

[Jane Davison]

Can I just make one plug too? So we always joked about this in the digital accessibility coordinator space is, we call it the cube drive by. And it's--you know, Susan brought this up, and I think John did, too, about get involved early with your digital accessibility coordinator when you're preparing that RFP. You know, don't come to them three days after the RFP was going out for bid and go, hey, you know, we talked about accessibility in paragraph whatever. Is that OK? You know, like, no, you don't drive by their cube at the 11th hour. Try to bring them into that conversation very early, and let them help you with that because the digital accessibility coordinators of the state are smart people.

00:36:28:09

[Jay Wyant]

Yeah, to link with the whole concept of bringing the confrontation in at the beginning, all of you have talked about really thinking about accessibility, user experience, and all that at the very beginning before you start making the decision of what kind of technology you want to buy. Because sometimes you may think, we want that shiny new thing. But you start first--you start thinking about it, and maybe it's not that shiny new thing, but that nice bland thing over there that actually will do the job better and have a longer term deal for you. Susan.

00:36:59:09

[Susan Ramlet]

This is Susan. Thank you, Jay. That makes me think of another point that John was talking about agile and the product model in your question to him. And it's sometimes difficult in a project model to get the right people involved early enough because sometimes you don't have your funding until you have a project, and you don't have a project until you have a thing that you're going to build, or deploy, or whatever. And so that's a challenge, at least in my organization, that we have to work through, is, making sure that teams know who to come to early and who to get involved in that RFP process even before there's funding, maybe, for that particular initiative, until you know what it's going to cost. And some of that upfront work gets forgotten because we get so focused on a tool or a technology and deploying that thing.

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So I think that's a challenge we have with--that we need to work through as we are--I think we can--I think people working in the product model can benefit by having more of a product team together that's doing that work through an entire life cycle--a product not necessarily being a tool, but potentially being a service or a solution that is comprised of several tools. So I think that the product model can help us in that way, wherein the Project model, it can be challenging to get the right people involved upfront.

00:38:28:03

[Jay Wyant]

Thank you, Susan. Another great segue to John. So, John, please go ahead.

00:38:34:05

[John Mumma]

Yeah, just a quick thought--Susan mentioned cost, which triggered a thought in my head. Sometimes people come to us and say, well, you know, that's too much time, which is, you know, the equivalent of money, or something to that effect. Well, they don't realize if this work isn't done up front, it's a lot more expensive to re-engineer things on the back end, right?

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When we kicked off this call, I was talking about moving from an inside-out to an outside-in perspective. And this is what's typical, all right? We build things. We put it out there. It's a lot more expensive once it gets into the hands of our users, and I think that was one of the points that Susan made a little bit earlier as well, right? You put it in the hands of the users, and they don't like it, then you're trying to re-engineer things, and back it all out, and clean it all up. It's just a lot easier to start with accessibility. It's more efficient cost-wise. Then the people working the space are going to be a lot happier, too, right?

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Everyone's worked on projects and stuff where you get to the end and, you know, that's when you're doing your usability testing or accessibility testing. And, you know, everyone's ready to tear each other apart at that point and stuff like that. You don't need this extra stress by pushing these things off to the end. You're going to have happier teams working in this space if you put that stuff up front and you prioritize it. So that was the point I just wanted to share and piggyback off some of the stuff Susan was sharing with us.

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[Jay Wyant]

Thank you, John. Jane?

00:40:01:19

[Jane Davison]

Just one more tip--if you're hearing this--this is Jane--if you're hearing this and you may be nodding along, but you're not exactly sure, well, how do I even get started at the early stages of a product? Check around your agency for things like an equity tool. That's something that's getting traction in many spaces. It's been around for a long time, but sometimes, an equity tool or an equity analysis allows you to do that thinking work in advance around what are the impacts to different users if we do this thing, and what does that mean if the equity piece is around disability, or race or, you know, a certain population that you want to address. And so that can be a really good way to, like I said, that's a good way to do the thinking work in advance and then bring the right people to the table to help you with that.

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Sometimes, those equity tools inform business cases. Sometimes, you can use the business case or a business case template to do that. That's something that's been working at DHS. I know with product so there's plenty of additional front end ways to front load this with the way you--you know, again, develop your personas, maybe do some customer experience mapping to understand how things are already working for people or not working. But that will help you drive with empathy and get out of that fixed mindset that we can't do it, the vendor can't do it. You know, we just don't have the political will or the capital to do it. You know, throw that fixed mindset away, and start looking for other ways to really do that, that critical thinking up front, and your research, and play around with your designs in the beginning with folks. And then that way, that helps you again get out of that fixed mindset.

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[Jay Wyant]

Thank you, Jane. I'm so glad you brought up the equity tool. That--those equity tools actually are being driven by the Governor's Office initiative regarding equity. And they've asked every agency to build an equity tool. However, I want to note that MNIT, Minnesota IT Services, has an equity tool that they can make available to any agency if they don't already have one. And like the DHS and other agencies also have been leaders in the equity tool space. But we're trying to build some commonalities among all the agencies in terms of what those tools contain. And the tool is really simple. It gives you a chance to dive into, what do I need to think about? What do I need to account for? How do I plan for that? Before you start saying, we're buying this shiny thing. And so I think it's a really valuable tool to think about. And now, we're getting close on time, so I have one more question I think will help us wrap some--tie some of these things together. And then anyone can start. Raise your hand first. So who can hit that button first?

00:42:49:10

So here's the question. So we've talked about creating excellent customer service. You represent tools. You've partnered in collecting user stories, performing joint journey mapping, practicing trust but verify in procurement, and so on. When we consider that as an organization, we're engaged in hundreds of programs, thousands of activities, and hundreds if not thousands of projects, federal contracts, and so on, how do we do that in everything we do? Who would like to go first?

00:43:31:13

OK, Susan, you're on.

00:43:33:13

[Susan Ramlet]

I can start. Yeah, and then it'll be nice to finish with people that are in the state, but from my outside perspective, I think scale--I mean, I would call that scale--how do we scale when we have small teams? How do we scale when we have grassroots initiatives of people trying to do the right thing? On the Technology Advisory Council, in our customer experience subcommittee, one of our charter items this year, our main charter focus this year is to permeate. How do we share the winning recipes, as one of our mates calls it, the winning recipes like the state fair, with other people? So when there's a case study, share those case studies. When there's a user group, get those user groups together. Those are ways that you can start to scale and share the goodness of what's going on in various agencies.

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The state is very siloed. My company is very siloed. We have a lot of similar challenges. And so how do we get together an organization--ways that people can share and leverage the research that's going on, or leverage the best practices and so on and learn from each other? And I think a key part of that that we're also exploring on the TAC this year is--that I've been really interested in lately--is storytelling. How do we tell good stories about the impacts of what can be done with this kind of work? And improving our storytelling abilities, and getting those stories out there, finding ways to do that--I think the more that we can--I think the more we can do that, the more we can advocate for these practices.

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It's a little bit heady, but I think it's the permeation, and getting people excited about it, and really sharing it out, and finding ways to do that so that people want to jump on board.

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[Jay Wyant]

Thank you, Susan. John. We can't hear you, John.

00:45:39:12

[John Mumma]

Sorry, this is John. Yeah, I think, you know, what we always talk about is that it's got to become a part of everyone's DNA, right? That's got to be their first inkling. Like, hey, we got a problem. Let's see what our customers think, right? We got a opportunity, potentially. Let's see what our users and staff think, right? So it's really building up that muscle memory of like, let's go get--I think both Jane and Susan alluded to earlier--like, we want to be using data-driven--we want to make data-driven decisions, right? So that's part of that DNA. Let's

go find out, you know, the data comes from our customers, and our users, and our staff, and everything. So it's really just getting people in the habit of not reacting necessarily without getting the required inputs from their customers and their users. I think that's really what it is, Jay. That's the big mind shift, right? Jay brings me a problem. I'm not going to try to figure out how to solve it until I go talk to my customers, right? Are they experiencing the same problem, right? I got to get some kind of consensus around it. And then I got to figure out a way forward. And then I got to put things back in their hand, and get feedback, and make sure that I'm addressing that problem. So it really becomes like, how do we get it into everyone's DNA? And that's their first inkling is to talk to their customers before reacting and responding to something.

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[Jane Davison]

You did--you didn't--this is Jane.

00:47:06:20

[Jay Wyant]

My turn. This is Jay speaking. Thank you, John, for saying that. And I think--and one thing you often bring up, too, is, look, sometimes you have to define the customer. Like, to use your restaurant experience earlier, is the customer, the person who actually comes in to buy--to eat at the restaurant? Is the customer the person who actually fulfilling the program that they're going to be doing to help them? And so working backward from the restaurant customer to other customers to figure out who to talk to, I could see that being a way to--an important step for people to do to figure out, who should I be talking to? Am I actually talking to the right people? Does anybody else have any other comments you want to throw in?

00:47:50:15

[Jane Davison]

Well, this is Jane. I guess I was going to maybe offer--it's been several years ago. I know Jennifer Pahlka's book "Recoding America" is getting a lot of buzz. There's another book out there and another good thinker, someone who I've had the chance to visit with. And her name is Cyd Harrell, and she has a book called "The Civic Technologist's Practice Guide." And one of the things that she said to me in kind of my early mentoring with her--she was like, "Look, "Jane, you may be a designer by trade, "but design decisions are getting made "all over your organization all day, every day at all the levels."

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And so, you know, I think John alluded to this, and certainly Susan did, too, that part of this is also about if you want to scale, we've got to invest in our talent right here, and really build the capacity here for developers, and analysts, and different folks to be able to make those good design decisions as they pertain to good user experience and good accessibility. And that, in turn, kind of helps us build that design infrastructure that we need to be a design-first or person-first, human-centered, inclusive kind of agency. And so there's a lot of infrastructure that's now being put in place around product and agile that's, you know, lending itself well to then

helping us not only make good decisions on the fly, but then kind of codify those into good standards that can--and good components and designs that can be reused and kind of make us a lot more efficient.

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So those are just some thoughts that I had is like, just investing in our people here and making sure that we have that good capacity for good design decisions at all levels of the org.

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[Jay Wyant]

Jane, that was a great way to summarize a lot of these issues that we've talked about, and I would like to add also to that to when we talk about core things that we think everyone should know. Now, people mentioned--we mentioned earlier in this conversation about core things like accessibility and UX. And we could point out, for example, that accessibility that we know, like worldwide--like the world wide web, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, or WCAG, has very measurable, specific things that sometimes seem pretty sophisticated to people, and they are in some way. But they represent the layered experience of users. And they were based on people going out and doing that user experience, doing that design thinking, and asking people, what works for you, what doesn't work for you, and using that to codify that into the criteria.

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And so there are tools like that not only in accessibility, but in UX that are based on rich, rich experience that we can use. And the more we learn about these tools, and the more we can use them, we can set the baseline by implementing those kind of concepts in our work, and then going from there to add on more to our actual specific customer. So I think we have a lot of tools here that we just need to help people understand how to use and then go from there and experience it.

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So that's all my thoughts. But if anybody else would like to add some more remarks before we close off for the day--we had a wonderful conversation. Anyone else? Nope? All right, well, again, I want to thank everyone, Susan, John, Jane, our interpreter, our comp reader, our staff who are helping us with the managing the event, everyone for putting this together and making it all work. I so much love the conversation. I can't wait for the recording so we can share with even more people out there. So again, thank you all so much for doing this and for such a wonderful conversation. Now it's time for us to spread the word, spread the joy, and help everybody understand how to make a good customer experience. Thank you.

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