

More Companies Are Looking to Hire Accessibility Specialists; Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, lawsuits, and diversity and inclusion efforts explain the increase in accessibility job postings, advocates and executives say

Alcántara, Ann-Marie . Wall Street Journal (Online) ; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]. 01 Sep 2021.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Accessibility jobs, ranging from "head of accessibility" to "accessibility analyst," are increasing at a rapid pace across industries as companies strive to make their products and services more tailored to people with disabilities. The number of job listings with "accessibility" in the title grew 78% in the year ended in July from the previous 12 months, LinkedIn said in response to a data request from The Wall Street Journal. Such listings had risen 38% in the year between August 2019 and July 2020 compared with the previous year, according to the professional networking site owned by Microsoft Corp.

Accessibility positions still represent only a fraction of the millions of jobs listed on LinkedIn. In the year between August 2020 and July 2021, about 12,000 jobs had "accessibility" in the title, LinkedIn said.

Atlassian Corp., a maker of collaboration, development, and issue-tracking software for business use, is looking to hire a head of accessibility to lead its five engineering, research and design employees already working on accessibility. Atlassian has rolled out several accessibility updates to its products, such as adding a colorblind mode to Trello, its collaboration tool.

The company is still at the beginning of its accessibility efforts, said Zack Gottlieb, head of design for platform and enterprise at Atlassian. "I want to make sure that every experience that comes out of Atlassian is accessible from the start," Mr. Gottlieb said.

The rise in accessibility jobs is fueled by a number of factors, including effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, disability lawsuits, and diversity and inclusion efforts, advocates and hiring managers said.

The ubiquity of remote work and online shopping during the pandemic laid bare certain products' shortcomings for some customers and employees—problems such as a lack of captions on video calls that would have helped people with hearing disabilities.

"What Covid has done is made people aware, at a level that nothing else would have made them aware, about what a digital presence means and having equal access," said Jack McElaney, vice president of sales and marketing at Microassist Inc., a consulting firm focused on digital accessibility, and founder of Microassist's newsletter Accessibility in the News.

Legal risk has grown as well. Lawsuits in the U.S. alleging that websites, apps and digital videos were inaccessible to people with disabilities have risen over the years, with about 3,500 filed in 2020, up from about 2,900 in 2019, according to data from UseableNet Inc., a technology firm that offers accessibility-compliance technology and services.

Many companies are also working to fulfill the diversity and inclusion promises they made as a response to last summer's protests over discrimination, racial inequity and the murder of George Floyd while in police custody. Meanwhile, many baby boomers, an estimated 73 million people, need access to accessibility products, even if

they don't identify as having a disability.

Companies don't want to fall behind in accessibility as the subject becomes more prominent, said Jennison Asuncion, head of accessibility engineering evangelism at LinkedIn and leader of the Twitter Inc. account @a11y jobs, which tweets out accessibility job listings. The term a11y refers to accessible technology, derived from the first and last letters in "accessibility" and the 11 in between.

"There's a little bit of kinship and wanting to also do the right thing," Mr. Asuncion said. "And I don't think any company wants to be seen as not caring."

Accessibility jobs are posted on traditional job sites as well as job boards dedicated to the subject, such as A11y Jobs and Inclusively, a professional networking platform owned by Ligilo Inc. that focuses on people with disabilities, mental health conditions and chronic illnesses.

Zendesk Inc. is hiring for three positions related to accessibility. The maker of customer-service software already has an accessibility initiative, with employees across the company working part time on these efforts. Now, Zendesk plans to hire a team dedicated to accessibility full time, said Rick Boardman, senior director of product accessibility at Zendesk. Two of the three new hires will report to him, he said.

"Our goal is to remove friction from every part of the customer journey, and accessibility is a key pillar needed to provide the best service," Mr. Boardman said.

The company has made accessibility updates to its software, such as adding keyboard support, which enables people who are blind or have a tremor to access a website with keyboard shortcuts, for instance by using the tab key to navigate a site.

Small but concrete changes in listings can help people with disabilities feel more comfortable applying for jobs and disclosing the accommodations they need, consultants said.

"You want to be able to disclose so that you can get the accommodations that you need and you want to be able to do it without feeling like you're asking for something extra, because it is not extra," said Alexa Huth, a consultant at management consulting firm Wheelhouse Group LLC who is visually impaired. "It is what you need to succeed in your job just like anybody else."

Write to Ann-Marie Alcántara at ann-marie.alcantara@wsj.com

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Credit: By Ann-Marie Alcántara

DETAILS

Subject:	Software; Collaboration; Handicapped accessibility; Employees; Pandemics; Multiculturalism & pluralism; Consulting firms; Disabled people; Baby boomers; Coronaviruses; Disability; Keyboards; COVID-19
Business indexing term:	Subject: Employees Consulting firms; Corporation: LinkedIn Corp; Industry: 81331 : Social Advocacy Organizations
Company / organization:	Name: LinkedIn Corp; NAICS: 518210
Classification:	81331: Social Advocacy Organizations
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal (Online); New York, N.Y.
Publication year:	2021
Publication date:	Sep 1, 2021

column:	Experience Report
Section:	C Suite
Publisher:	Dow Jones &Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics
e-ISSN:	25749579
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2567980768
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/more-companies-are-looking-hire-accessibility/docview/2567980768/se-2?accountid=44910
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Last updated:	2021-09-01
Database:	U.S. Major Dailies

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