

Allie Thu 0:00

They are one of the organizations that truly do put the user first, whether it be through their digital product itself or making considerations for people with disabilities that actually go to places. Welcome to The Industry of UX, a podcast crafted to review, share and discuss the ins and outs of the user experience industry.

Filippo Lovotti 0:22

Let's dive into the episode.

Hello, you wonderful listeners. Welcome back to another episode of the industry of UX. I'm your host, Filippo, I hope you're having a great start of this 2021. Okay. I'm very excited about this episode episode, because today we get to talk about accessibility. With Allie Thu, my Zappos colleague, and Senior Accessibility Experience Designer. I've seen Allie's passion for accessibility firsthand. And she has made tremendous progress with making our designs more inclusive. I really like Allie's origin story. And before jumping into our conversation, let her walk us down memory lane and tell us how she got started in design and front end development.

Allie Thu 1:24

I graduated with a marketing degree started a marketing job straight out of college. And at that job, we did not have a website, it was a franchise for an AT&T retailer. And so I in the past always, I think just had a general interest in design. And I just stepped up to that challenge and was like, I'll build our website, no problem, and got a book on Adobe, I got a bootleg copy of Adobe, and decided that I would figure out how to build this. And so that was kind of my first glimpse into UX development, like the whole world of digital, just websites in general, without really understanding or realizing that I was into this thing. After a year and a half or so I decided to quit my job and go back to school for design. And during that time, I ended up getting a internship at Zappos in design. And this was specifically around visual design. And so I did that I was in the visual design team, probably for a couple years, then it was still it was technically in tech. And so a lot of the friends that I had made were guys in front end development and decided that I wanted to really dive back into it from that time that I built the website.

Filippo Lovotti 2:45

I love it. I mean, many of us start out exactly this way and gradually make it to the UX world and owl is no different. She did join the front end development team at Zappos. But slowly transition to the UX team where she took on the role of design technologist, a beautiful mix of front end development and UX design. Next up, he's going to tell us how she carved out her own accessibility designer position, how she sells and explains the ROI of accessibility to leadership, her inspiration and resources and some next steps you can take to make your website or product more accessible. Whether you are a researcher, designer or developer, let me know what you think about the episode by leaving a comment on theindustryofux.com or by tweeting @IndustryUX. Okay, on to the conversation with Allie.

Allie Thu 3:49

We have this trip to Amazon, we had the chance to sit in on this panel and my eyes opened to a whole new world I knew existed, but did not know would mean so much to me or resonate with me. It occurred to me a couple things. There was a need for this. And outside of just like a legal compliance thing. We were not really connecting or thinking about or considering all of our users. And I'm an emotional person and empath, I should say. And it just hit me. I think I've always just, I don't know, I'm very driven by things that emotionally triggered me. It hit me, we sat through that panel, I was so interested and it was the first time in a long time that I felt like this is something I can really help with even if I don't have a disability but I can understand and empathize and really make a change in the space that I am and lead this thing and it pumped me like I had a fire lit under me and we went back to work and I was like alright, let's get started. And here was my purpose. I Felt now that with both of these skill sets, design and tech, their front end, that's what accessibility like truly entails. That's what is needed to make things accessible. And so if I can speak both languages and or no both groups, then I can really like charge this. And so that's what I did. I did it a lot on my downtime or during work hours. But I definitely prioritized it made it a part of my daily work schedule. And it wasn't always probably the smartest thing to do from a business priority standpoint at that time. But I knew that the the focus needed to be there the work needed to be done. And that the only way it was going to get done as if someone really put time into it. And so at that time, I was spending my weekends, my nights learning about this, and figuring out what are ways we can do build this into Zappos and how we work. And I got the opportunity to ultimately turn this into a role at Zappos. So similar to how I did it with the design technologist thing, it was like deja vu, accessibility and accessibility specialist or accessibility designer. This did not exist at Zappos, what are the things that my husband suggested I do is really start doing research around just the industry in general, and cold call essentially, on LinkedIn, find people in the industry and figure out how they work. What did they call themselves? What do their days look like? What is this role, and that was one of the best things I could have done. So I have continued to network through LinkedIn, just finding people anywhere, especially within big organizations. So similar to Zappos, that I can learn, grow, borrow ideas from all of those things. And so that really helped me build out this role, figure out what the accountability should be and drive this position for me. And so long story short, it happened. And I became a member of the legal team, because it ultimately fell under compliance,

Filippo Lovotti 7:11

you definitely have a very interesting story. It was great seeing you becoming more and more passionate about accessibility. And using this passion to carve out a role for yourself within Zappos. Accessibility is a term that gets thrown around a lot. And the definition changes depending who you're talking to, at that moment. If I asked you to define accessibility right now, using your knowledge of Dev and UX, how would you do that?

Allie Thu 7:40

I think accessibility from a broader sense, accessibility is really just making the commitment to approach a problem from all different angles and understanding who your users are, and what their lives are like, and how they approach whatever it is that they're doing, or seeing or walking on or buying or there, whatever it might be. Accessibility gets tied into every single thing. I would say if you think about it, from a broader perspective, everything we touch, we see we smell we like everything within your daily life, it's a really tough thing to nail down. I specifically focus on the digital side of things, but truly, it's everywhere. And so it's considering everybody in every circumstance. And though that may seem overwhelming and daunting, it's a fun way to get a perspective on whatever you're doing, or however you approach situations. meetings in general are different for people with different abilities. The writing an email is different for somebody with different abilities, like everything you do is a different experience for everyone. And so I would say that accessibility is just really taking a step back and understanding how everybody approaches everything.

Filippo Lovotti 9:03

Okay, that was just an amazing definition. That was really beautiful. Now, let's change gears a little bit. Let me where my business and profit hat, make an executive grin and ask you the more higher up question I can come up with. What is the ROI of accessibility? And how do you set accessibility at the business level?

Allie Thu 9:24

Selling accessibility or convincing your company to buy into or build accessibility into the process is a challenge I would say across the board. And through my networking has been a common pattern everywhere. There are few companies who really truly walk the walk and put their customers first and understand that there's no question accessibility is a must, not because of compliance but because it's the right thing to do for the customer. There I think there's three things the first point or measure for ROI of acceptance. Ability would be brand loyalty, people feel good shopping for companies or places or brands that put people first. I think that really resonates with people, not

everybody. But that's really a driving factor, especially in this time, people really gravitate towards brands that put people first and are inclusive or environmentally friendly, or whatever it might be. I think that is a big factor. And though it might not appear at first, or showcase itself at first, that if you are a brand that really does put your people first and it's a known thing, then you're going to differentiate yourself from other brands. And you'll get that market, no matter what community it is, and really have them providing word of mouth and being your own spokespeople, pushing your brand further. So I think brand loyalty is a big piece.

Filippo Lovotti 10:57

Yeah, to briefly touch on that. A couple of years ago, I was in a meeting with an executive from one of the brands that we carry on Zappos. And she mentioned that according to the research that they had done about brand loyalty, they could see that brands that take a stance, especially on the subjects, you mentioned, accessibility, the environment and humanitarian causes, these brands increase brand loyalty, which is great on one hand, but I can see how people can see it as convenient on the other. I personally see it as a win win, and a good reason to buy into accessibility.

Allie Thu 11:32

Yes, and I think it's how you spin it, it's how you think about it, yes, you're gonna get PR from it. But, and yes, that's great for your organization. But ultimately, what's happening with this PR is that you're getting more reach more people are discovering you. So it's how you think about it, I think that makes a big difference. If you're only in it for the money or to grow the bottom line, then I feel that that will become apparent over time, and people will see through that. So if you're truly authentic, and speak and represent your brand, or showcase your brand is a brand for the people, you're listening to your users, you're taking feedback and you're growing from it, I think that's a huge benefit in differentiator for a brand. The other thing or two things I was going to say was in terms of ROI, usability, the overall investment that you're making, ensuring that your product is usable is huge. So basically, what the industry says is, if you're building an accessible product, it's going to be more usable than if it's not accessible. So it's usable for it's more usable for everyone, I should say, when you create a, let's say, a web page that is built out in sequential order, or you have colors, your texts are more have more contrast with the foreground and background, it's easier for everybody to read, you don't necessarily have to have a disability, it's just easier for everybody to read. If you provide closed captioning on your videos, anybody can I watch my husband and I we watch TV with closed captioning 24 seven, because it's just easier, it's easier to consume, you can do it anywhere you don't need the volume on, there's just so many different factors that fall under accessibility that truly create a better experience for everybody. So if you're incorporating accessibility into your product, you're ultimately creating a better product for everybody. So I think that is a huge factor. And then lastly, the what I'm thinking is, when it comes down to the code, you can build sloppy code, you can build clean code, if you build clean semantic code. If you use that, then the chances that you're going to have to go back and refactor things after the fact fix these bugs, fix whatever it might be is costly. So if you build it up front, if you do it

correctly, fixes maintenance is not a part of the issue, or is not a part of the process anymore, and you're ultimately saving the company money as well.

Filippo Lovotti 14:03

Okay,

so let's look at some example of good accessibility, shall we? When you're asked about products or websites out in the wild that are accessible? What do you normally bring up as an example.

Allie Thu 14:17

So places that I refer to or are used as a reference day in and day out for my role today. So government agencies have stricter guidelines for accessibility, the UK specifically so that they have laws in place that require accessibility to be incorporated into their products were here there are repercussions if you don't so you can have a lawsuit, but it's actually illegal in the UK, I believe, to not build or incorporate accessibility to not have accessible websites. And so one of my go twos is looking at the government UK design system. Because they've got it down, they've figured out how to create a pretty enjoyable, aesthetically pleasing look and style, while also making sure that their whatever components and things that they build digitally, will be accessible. In terms of retailers, it's hard because I think that there are nobody's perfect at this. And so there are places where there are different portions of their site or their products that are more accessible than others. Airbnb is a fantastic example of good accessibility by connected with them. I know some people there, but I've also connected through LinkedIn to to understand their accessible realm, whether it be their website or their apps, and they are one of the organizations that truly do put the user first, whether it be through their digital product itself, or making considerations for people with disabilities that actually go to places. So understanding if somebody is in a wheelchair, and they're looking for a house to rent, they need to know is there a ramp available? Are there accessible buildings in the house, and so they've approached the whole problem from I would say, a 360 degree angle. And I've thought about it across the entire experience, which has been really special to see and observe and learn about. So I would say they are a really good example of a company that does good accessibility, I do think I can mention that one bad trend that's happening right now, are these accessibility plugins that are being sold to different websites or apps, how they're selling themselves is that you just plug this in you, you put a quick code snippet into your site, and you'll have a fully accessible site. False, it's essentially a bandaid. And there are there's a ton of information out there around these things. But as we spoke about earlier, people who use screen readers use them day in day out. And there's their usage patterns of the way the way the screen reader voice talks, the quick key shortcuts, the there's all different pieces that come into how they function and use the web. And so when an overlay comes into play, it's essentially throwing a wrench into their workflow because they're having to relearn a new thing, retrain themselves on

how to navigate through a web page, or what it may be. And it slows them down. It's not a helpful thing. And it also creates the opportunity for developers, designers, mostly developers, but also designers to look over the actual user experience and build sloppy stuff that's not actually usable for everybody, where if you just approach the product from the beginning and understood how it needs to be built, what considerations you need to make, you wouldn't need this plug in to begin with. And so the plugin is just basically like a sleazy sales car salesman that it has all the bells and whistles you need to make this work. But in reality, that's not the case. Yep,

Filippo Lovotti 18:20

I've seen these plugins myself, and I was weirded out at first, because I could not understand how say, if a page is not set up a certain way, how was this thing going to radically change it? It sounds like my instincts are good. Speaking on improving UX based on accessibility guidelines. What are some concepts and quick tips we can start thinking about and implementing in our workflow?

Allie Thu 18:44

I would say it depends on what skill set you have. If you're a researcher, think about that whole community, the disabled community, maybe you want to do user usability sessions with disabled users to get an idea of how they're thinking about or approaching or using your product. If you're a designer, there's a number of different things you can do, you can if there's text in your product, make sure that the color contrast the foreground and background color have enough contrast so that it's legible to people who have vision impairment. If you're implementing movement into your design, make sure that it actually serves a purpose and make it as minimal as possible because a lot of movement can really be harmful or damaging or obstructive to people with different mental disabilities or ADHD or whatever or some kind of cognitive issue. It can be very distracting and even at times, if there's a lot of flashing it can cause seizures and people. If you're a designer, make sure you leverage whitespace. So very close elements in close proximity or especially text is really difficult to really consume and so providing proper whitespace or enough whitespace or breathing room for whatever it might be, is super helpful. And then for designer, I would say the last thing, there's a number of things. But design if you're going to be using icons or symbols or those types of things to represent actual things, to accommodate those, or to accompany those, I should say, with labels, visual labels, and if you don't, so for instance, search, but search is a pretty common, the magnifying glass is like a well known icon. But there are other icons where people start getting designed me or artsy with it, if it's a filter icon, or whatever it might be, it's best to accompany that icon with actual text that describes what the icon is, if you're not going to do that, or if there isn't room within your UI to do that, at least provide your developer who's going to build the experience with that label so that they know when they build it and code it that they will include that label that's visually hidden for users who use assistive technology. So they'll at least hear not picture of a funnel, but they'll hear filter list. So it's more descriptive. Other things for developers comes down to semantic writing semantic code, code things as they are, don't make a list a series of divs if it doesn't need to be

make it what it actually is. And that applies across the board. So use semantic code and don't abuse Aria. So Aria is basically a tool that provides attributes in the code that gives users who use screen readers additional context for what they're reading. And so if you overuse it, you can actually make the experience worse for the user. So be very mindful of that. So understand, truly understand what you're implementing and understand the ins and outs of ARIA, I think that would be super helpful. And then I guess Lastly, for QA, get your hands dirty, and really dive in and expand your horizons and skill set and turn on the screen reader and go through things, or don't use your mouse and navigate with your keyboard only. And those are actually things that everybody should do, as I mentioned at the start, like I think everybody who has a hand in building a product should test it out themselves, don't just look at it, walk through it and walk through it, not just with your mouse, walk through it with your keyboard, walk through it with a screen reader enabled, you should truly do the full all the checks before you put something out that becomes customer facing.

Filippo Lovotti 22:41

I really love these recommendations. So we're getting close to the end of the episode. And I would like for you to share some resources and other recommendations for folks that want to dive deeper into accessibility.

Allie Thu 22:54

So again, I think it comes down to skill set, what resources are most useful to you? from a design standpoint, I think looking at existing design systems, that's what is the most helpful thing that I found to truly understand what considerations you need to make when building a new component or feature that's going to have components in it to design systems or three that I really enjoy are Shopify. So Shopify is Polaris, the UK government website or design system. And I think Atlassian has done a really good job to around considering accessibility within their components. And those design systems can be beneficial or helpful to not just designers, but also developers, because there's code snippets that are included within those, generally speaking, or let me do that development, the wick gag. So the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, is a super nitty gritty breakdown of all of the different guidelines that pertain to accessibility. There are different levels, it's a lot, but I think if you're looking for the true source of what you're trying to build, wic ag is a good thing. But there's what CAG, which I've shown our developers, and it's a separate site that kind of breaks down its lien more layman's terms for the different guidelines you need to do and how to build them and why they're important. So I think a big piece too, is understanding for people who are having a hand in building things, knowing what they need to do, the consideration they need to make, but then also attaching like the user story to it. So how Why do I need to build it this way? Why does it need to be this way? Who is this affecting? And why Will this be beneficial to the person? So I think that having that user piece the empath, or the empathy really does help people learn and then be more driven to incorporate these changes or processes into their workflow. And then there's just me So just meeting medium, the website, there's constantly articles people write. And if you just Google accessibility and especially accessibility designer, whatever skill set you have,

there's just a ton of information out there. There's a ton of newsletters, like I get weekly newsletters with summaries of different articles. And then lastly, network reach out to people, you don't need to know them. There's nothing wrong with growing your community and especially within accessibility. It's such a small community. When I cold message people on LinkedIn, more often than not people are responsive because they know how smaller group is and you know how beneficial it is to share your learnings and just get to know each other and understand everybody's, I guess, piece of the industry. So I've found that really helpful as well.

Filippo Lovotti 26:01

I hope you enjoyed the episode. If you're interested in reaching out to Allie. To learn more about all things accessibility, head over to LinkedIn and look for Allie Thu. That's T h u if you're interested in any of the resources we mentioned, all the links are on the episode page of our website, theindustryofux.com thanks to Allie for coming on the show. A big thank you to Demi He for the post production work.

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