How to Eat the Digital Accessibility Elephant

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Big Overhaul

I'd like you to think for a moment about the last time you implemented a big overhaul. Maybe you had to pack up all your belongings and move out of your house; or you did a bathroom or kitchen remodel; or instituted a major company-wide policy change. Now think about how you felt during that time. Was it an enjoyable experience?

Small Shifts

Now, think for a moment about a time when you made a small change. Instead of packing up your whole house, maybe you cleaned out the front closet; or instead of remodeling the kitchen you replaced the sink; or instead of a major policy change you modified one company rule. How did you feel during this time, as compared to how you felt during the big overhaul? Was this experience any easier or more enjoyable than the major change?

Has anyone heard the phrase, "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer is one bite at a time.

Atomic Habits by James Clear

As I was reading this book, I realized that when we talk about digital accessibility on our campus, we are using these principles that Mr. Clear describes. So, I read the book through the lens of digital accessibility. And I'm going to share with you my takeaways.

1% Shifts = Big Impact

- Small shifts are more easily implemented and accepted rather than big overhauls.

- Effects may not be immediately noticeable, but builds over time to become significant.

Example, trajectory of a plane: Let's say you board a plane in Los Angeles, heading to NYC. If the nose of that plane is shifted 3.5 degrees to the south, you would end up in Washington, DC, which is 367 kilometers (228 miles) away from your intended destination. Sitting on the runway,

you wouldn't notice the change, but getting off the plane you would! Making a small adjustment completely changed the trajectory.

- Creating good systems is more important than the ending goal. Systems will help you get to the goal.

Example, New Year's resolutions: Many people fail at keeping resolutions for the entire year because we don't consider how to get to our goal. We say things like, "I want to be healthy" or "I want to save money." It's more effective to lay out specific plans and individual steps we can take in order to get to that goal.

Saying that the institution "needs to be more accessible" isn't effective. We need to be very intentional and specific about how to help move the initiative forward. As accessibility champions, we can bring specific ideas and actions to the table.

4 Laws of Atomic Habits

1. Make it obvious

2. Make it attractive

3. Make it easy

4. Make it satisfying

By implementing small shifts to incorporate these 4 principles, you are starting to build a system that will support improving the overall digital accessibility culture, thereby "eating the digital accessibility elephant."

Note: The abbreviation A11y is used in place of the word Accessibility

1. Make it Obvious

"Environment is the invisible hand that shapes human behavior."

Example: Build an environment that supports the habit you're implementing

- Textured, anti-slip tape on the floor

A visually impaired student at SUNY Oswego used to go past the door for the Accessibility Resources office. She knew what hallway to go down, but there was nothing to distinguish the Accessibility Resources door from any other door. The staff decided to put textured, anti-slip tape on the floor outside the door, so it would be obvious when she had reached the office.

A11y: Digital accessibility should be front and center.

Meet people where they are, physically and conceptually

- Hold training during regular department or unit meetings

    - Accessibility should not be treated as an add-on or afterthought

    - Make it automatically part of workshops, orientations, course developments, professional development opportunities

- Be direct, clear, and specific

    - Tends to be a disconnect of what the definition of "accessibility" is

    - Don't just say that people should improve the accessibility of their materials; tell them why and give them resources that tell them how

2. Make it Attractive

"We can find evidence for whatever mindset we choose."

Example: "Need to" versus "Get to"

- Won't have fun if you don't want to

- Man in a wheelchair

When I was a kid, if I didn't want to go somewhere with my family, I made that known, saying I wouldn't have any fun. My father would tell me, "Of course you won't have fun if you don't want to go." It took many years for me to fully understand that my attitude was determining my outlook.

There is an example in the book about a man in a wheelchair. When asked if it's difficult being confined by the wheelchair, he responds that he isn't confined, he's free to leave his house. Reframe your mindset to highlight the benefits.

A11y: Your wording around digital accessibility can create a more positive mindset for others.

Shift the perspective

- Use wording that has a positive implication to encourage people to join you

  - Difference between "You need to make your materials more accessible" and "You get to create a more positive experience for others by making your materials more accessible."

- Focus on the benefits accessibility has for a wide audience

  - Every one of us uses some kind of accessibility feature probably every day

    - Automatic grocery store doors

    - Hands-free GPS

    - Captions

    - Curb cuts

Example: Remember the potato peelers from the '70s and '80s? All metal, really skinny, difficult to hold. Retired businessman Sam Farber noticed his wife, who had arthritis, struggled with one of these. He came up with the idea of a big, fat, rubber handle, and he became the founder of **OXO Good Grips**. These Good Grips tools were marketed to everyone, not just people with arthritis. They benefit everyone because they are more comfortable and easier to use.

- By removing potential barriers, you are allowing people to consume digital content without having to think about how they are consuming it

- Important to point that out so people understand that accessibility helps those experiencing temporary, situational, or permanent disabilities, as well as those without any disabilities

3. Make it Easy

"If you want to master a habit, the key is to start with repetition, not perfection."

Example: Focus on one step at a time

- Learning to play an instrument

Learning how to play an instrument starts with repeating scales over and over. By running scales again and again you're training your brain that small action is part of your everyday routine. Repetition allows the action to become automatic and that's how habits are formed. Once the action is automatic, you can build on it.

A11y: Introduce and practice one aspect of accessibility at a time.

Progress over perfection

- Take baby steps, break it down to individual aspects to be more manageable
    - People tend to view accessibility as an insurmountable mountain
    - We can strive to be 1% more accessible than we used to be
- Provide a variety of formats for resources and training
    - In order to consistently do something repeatedly, it has to be somewhat easy for us.
    - Don't ask people to go out of their way to learn something new; provide them with specific step-by-step resources that can help them at any level
        - Beginner and intermediate level
        - Written and video tutorials
        - Synchronous and asynchronous sessions
        - Reputable sources such as LinkedIn Learning, Deque, WebAIM, etc

4. Make it Satisfying

"Pleasure teaches your brain that a behavior is worth remembering and repeating."

The first 3 laws help ensure the behavior will be performed. This law helps ensure the behavior will be repeated.

Example: Immediate vs delayed gratification

- Wrigley's chewing gum

- Positive attitude and inspirational quotes in the office

Our brains are hardwired to prioritize immediate rewards over delayed rewards. Chewing gum was sold commercially throughout the 1800s, made of bland resins. In 1891 a little company called Wrigley's changed the game by adding flavors to the gum, like Spearmint and Juicy Fruit. Consumption skyrocketed making Wrigley's the largest chewing gum company in the world. The flavor was the reward and the hook that triggered our brains telling us that it was a pleasurable experience and making us want to do it again.

I recently had conversations with two different Directors of Accessibility/Disability Resources, who basically said the same thing. Focus on positive reinforcement.

One said that her philosophy is "What does this student need to succeed? How can I make things better/easier for them?" Her office is decorated with positive, inspirational quotes and the office staff are always friendly so the students feel comfortable in their office. The other director said they have a rule in their office that they always smile when a student comes in. Doesn't matter what kind of day the staff has had, when they engage with students, they do it in a genuine and positive way. Because "the world is hard enough, we do what we can to make things better for our students." Staff members from both offices are rewarding students for coming into the office by providing a pleasant experience.

A11y: Reward accessibility efforts and mini-goals in fun and unique ways.

Foster a positive environment

- Keep a positive attitude about accessibility

- Add gamification aspect and/or incentives for participation

- ○ Bingo cards, scavenger hunt, friendly department competitions, etc

- ○ Collaborate with on-campus/local establishments to offer gift cards as prizes

- ○ Badges to display in email or on social media

- ○ Giveaways, raffles, swag

- ○ Include accessibility in grading rubric, or allow students to earn extra credit

- Make the content creator the Superhero

  - ○ By adding accessibility features, content creators are removing potential barriers and making a more positive, satisfying online experience for the user.

Putting it all together

Campus Accessibility Challenges

- 10-Day Challenge

  - ○ Held in January 2021 in response to overwhelming number of classes that went online due to the pandemic

- 5-Day Challenge

  - ○ Held in January 2022

Obvious

- Multiple recruitment emails were sent through our Communications & Marketing office

- Daily emails sent to participants; consistent communication every morning

- We provided an accessibility hub, containing step-by-step tutorials, detailed information, and other learning resources from reputable sources

Attractive

- Framed in a very inviting, friendly, and engaging manner

- Allowed participants to choose path

    - Beginner or Intermediate level, or both

- Reiterated benefits of accessibility to wide audiences

Easy

- Focused on one topic per day using word docs and presentations

- Outlined simple steps that can be taken to help improve documents

- Provided redundant information

    - Written and video tutorials

    - Synchronous and asynchronous recorded sessions

Satisfying

- Added a gamification aspect - certificate of completion

    - Working on making this more prominent in future endeavors

Maintain the System

"Success is not a goal to reach or a finish line to cross. It is a system to improve, an endless process to refine."

Example: Shift the trajectory

- Eating one apple

- Be intentional with small decisions and actions

Eating one apple doesn't mean you are automatically "healthier." We have to maintain healthy eating habits for a lengthy period of time to notice a difference. But eating an apple instead of a candy bar is a 1% shift that can help push us in a good direction. It's an easy action that can provide the foundation for a healthy lifestyle.

To shift our lifestyle, we shift our overall approach. Accessibility doesn't happen by accident. We must make very intentional decisions that create small shifts. By incorporating small changes to our everyday workflows, we are shifting the trajectory in order to move the initiative forward.

A11y: Continuing to make small, 1% improvements helps maintain the system that will eventually help change the culture.

What 1% shift can you implement?

Resources:

- Kate's Email: kathleen.deforest@oswego.edu

- LinkedIn: linkedin.com/in/kate-deforest

- Accessibility Website: oswego.edu/accessibility

- Tutorials: oswego.edu/accessibility/written-and-video-tutorials

- Atomic Habits: AtomicHabits.com