![deque | IAAP International Association of Accessibility Professionals — A division of G3ict]

Is COVID-19 *Still* Impacting Digital Accessibility?

A second Deque Systems survey launched in partnership with the International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP) and G3ict Research.

Overview

In partnership with the IAAP, Deque surveyed accessibility practitioners from around the world on the impact COVID-19 is having on employees and customers with disabilities, as well as on their organization's accessibility program and testing efforts. The first survey was issued in March 2020 to gather early insights and predictions on the impact that the COVID-19 Pandemic would have on digital accessibility. A second follow-up survey was conducted after August 2021 in an effort to compare early and late pandemic perceptions of the impact.

Now, eighteen months into the COVID-19 Pandemic, we're acutely aware of the increased reliance we have on digital services to stay safe and informed.

The results of this survey provide insight into the level of awareness surrounding the digital channel and digital accessibility. In turn, we hope these results will help organizations highlight priorities to ensure equal digital access to employees and customers with disabilities at this critical time.

Summary

Deque and the IAAP surveyed 292 accessibility practitioners during the months of March and April 2020. A follow-up survey received 270 responses through the months of August and September 2021. Answers were solicited by both parties through email and social media.

Individuals who took each survey varied in job roles, industries and organization size. Similar to the 2020 survey makeup, the majority of 2021 respondents reported their role as "accessibility specialist" (63%). The industry representing the most number of respondents was Education (31%).

73% of respondents reported that COVID-19 has "raised the awareness and impact of accessibility for their organization," exceeding their estimates by 11% from early 2020.

Overall, the results indicate an increased awareness around the digital channel and accessibility.

- **Awareness around the digital channel and accessibility exceeded estimates.** 83% of all respondents said that "COVID-19 has raised the profile and importance of digital channels for their organization" and 73% reported that "COVID-19 has raised the awareness and impact of accessibility on the digital channel."

- **Experts have been asked to do more, with less.** Despite the increased demand for digital accessibility, 24% of accessibility testing budgets were decreased and 39% remained flat throughout the pandemic.

- **Digital accessibility complaints from people with disabilities increased.** The percentage of people seeing an increase in reports that users with disabilities were encountering barriers has increased 32% from last year.

- **Digital accessibility still struggles to get equal internal attention.** Digital accessibility is consistently rated behind Demand & Scalability, Security and Performance for internal attention and priority throughout the pandemic.

96% of respondents expect the volume of their work to "increase or stay the same" through the end of 2021.

Survey Demographics

Of the 270 respondents surveyed through the months of August and September 2021, 63% identified as "accessibility specialists." Other roles included Design (9%), Engineering/ Development (7%), and IT (4%).

Almost a third of respondents (31%) work in the Education industry, followed by Telecommunications, Technology, Internet & Electronics (20%), Government (16%), Nonprofit (7%), and Finance / Financial Services (7%).

Roles
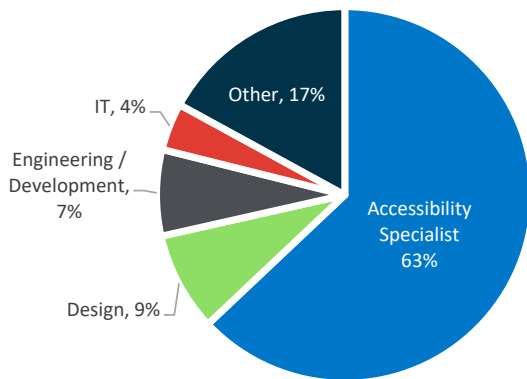
Industry
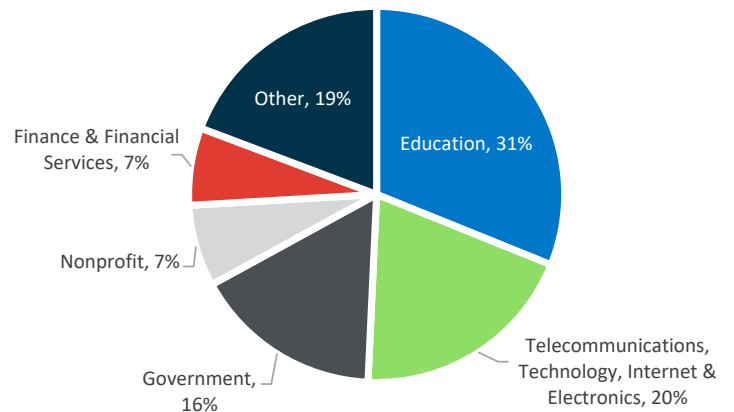
Other includes: Product, Quality Assurance, Legal / Compliance, Marketing / Communications, Business Development, Other

Other includes: Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals, Entertainment & Leisure, Business Support & Logistics, Retail & Consumer Durables, Utilities, Energy, and Extraction, Advertising & Marketing, Insurance, Manufacturing, Unemployed, Agriculture, Food & Beverages, Other

The majority of respondents reported working at organizations larger than 1,001 employees (62%), were located in the United States (63%), and have job seniority at Manager level or higher (83%).
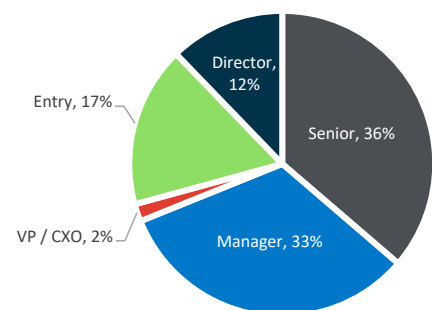
Organization Size
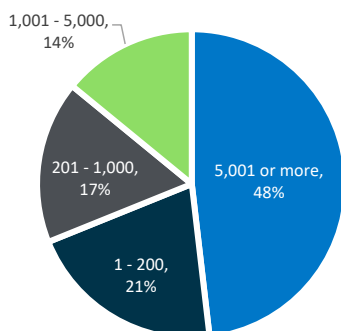
Location
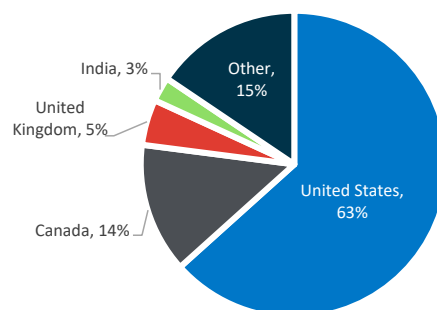
Job Seniority

Key Findings

Awareness of the digital channel and accessibility

The majority of respondents reported heightened awareness surrounding their organization's digital channels and accessibility. From 83% in March 2020 to 84% in August of 2021, respondents reported that COVID-19 has "raised the profile and importance of digital channels for their organization." This time however, 73% of respondents also reported that COVID-19 has "increased the awareness of the impact of accessibility on the digital channel," an 11% increase over the previous survey response.

84%
of respondents reported that COVID-19 has "raised the profile and importance of digital channels for their organization."

We saw mixed sentiments regarding the awareness of digital accessibility in the open-ended questions. Some respondents were able to capitalize on the increased attention to the subject but still believe much work is yet to be done :
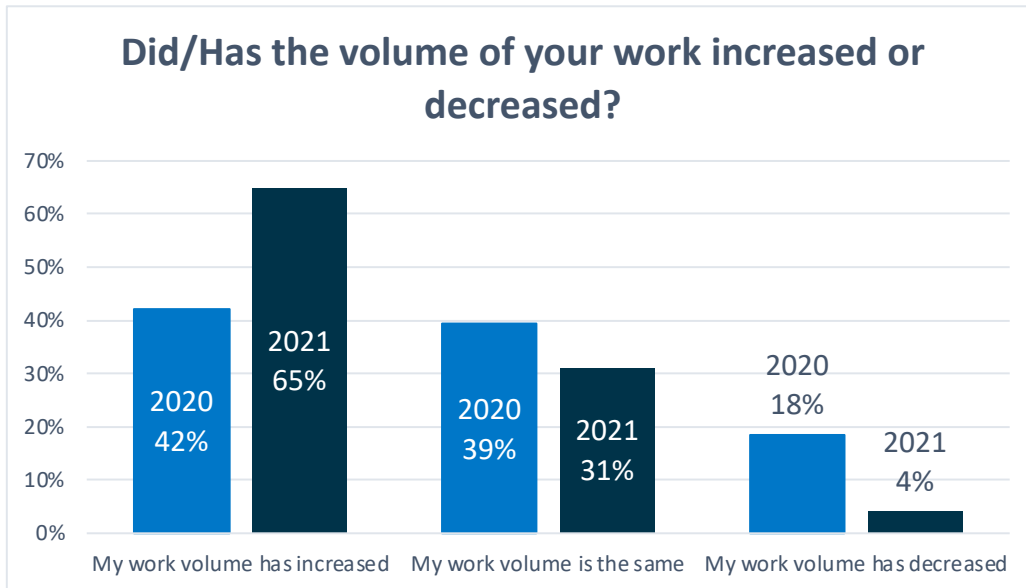
"Since COVID, some changes have been made to internal accessibility. We anticipate that efforts will continue and grow to make internal systems accessible. The importance of an inclusive and diverse (I & D) workforce is being emphasized now and is a cultural pillar of the company."

"Demand for accessibility is up, and lots of policy action, but little in the way of resourcing or engagement. COVID has put a lot of things in the 'urgent' category."

"Accessibility became more important and we allocated a new budget for training and resourcing for internal accessibility testing, but as a whole, accessibility still unfortunately ranks below other aspects (scalability, performance, security) in terms of priority."

Impact on work volume in March & April 2020

When asked whether respondents' work volume has increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the months of March and April, 81% said that their work volume has increased or stayed the same.

Did/Has the volume of your work increased or decreased?

	My work volume has increased	My work volume is the same	My work volume has decreased
2020	42%	39%	18%
2021	65%	31%	4%

The survey asked whether respondents' work volume has increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the months of March and April 2020 and asked again in August and September 2021. 96% said that their work volume increased or stayed the same in 2021, up 14% from early-pandemic efforts.
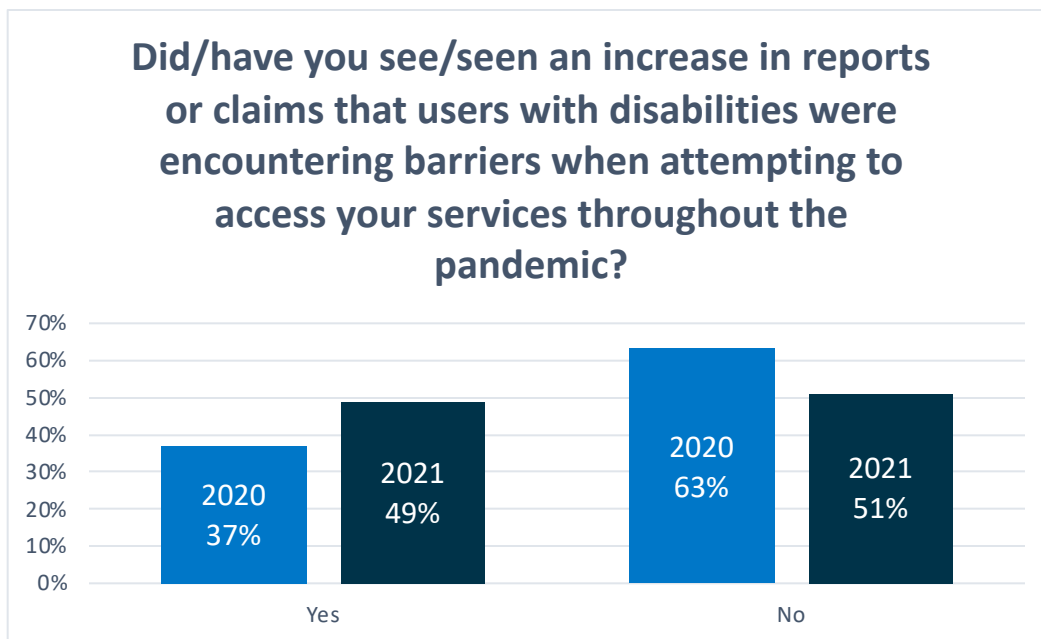
When asked to predict work volume for May, June and July 2020, 90% of total respondents indicated that they expected their work to increase or stay the same. The respondents' predictions appear to be correct. In fact, that upward trend continued through 2020 and even now through August and September of 2021.

One respondent describes their experience saying, "Although COVID increased the awareness of the need for accessible materials, there hasn't been time to devote to training others with the volume of work so my workload continues to increase."

Reported difficulty for people with disabilities

In early 2020, the majority of respondents had not heard reports that users with disabilities are having increased difficulty accessing their services during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, only 37% of respondents said they have heard reports of increased difficulty from users with disabilities.

Now, in late 2021, almost half (49%) of respondents indicate an increase in claims of inaccessibility seen throughout the pandemic.

Did/have you see/seen an increase in reports or claims that users with disabilities were encountering barriers when attempting to access your services throughout the pandemic?

	Yes	No
2020	37%	63%
2021	49%	51%

It appears as though it took some time for complaints to mount from early in the pandemic while many organizations still scrambled to provide remote work accommodations. In March of 2020, respondents had different expectations in mind: 86% reported that accessibility of their internal systems for remote employees has "remained unchanged" or has had "some changes made," but only 11% said that employees with disabilities are able to work remotely without any difficulty. Of course, not all people with disabilities are negatively affected by working remotely, but the volume of claims increased nonetheless.

Conclusion

Heightened awareness around the digital channel and accessibility

Now, even more evident than before, these survey efforts suggest that there is an increased awareness of the importance of the digital channel due to COVID-19. Survey data validates our collective digital experiences over the past two years as physical places of business around the world pivoted to move their business activities exclusively online or digital-first to accommodate safety measures.

The results also show an increase in awareness around digital accessibility. Even more so than experts forecasted from early in the pandemic.

However, the results do not necessarily suggest that proportionate action is being taken to address accessibility concerns across organizations.

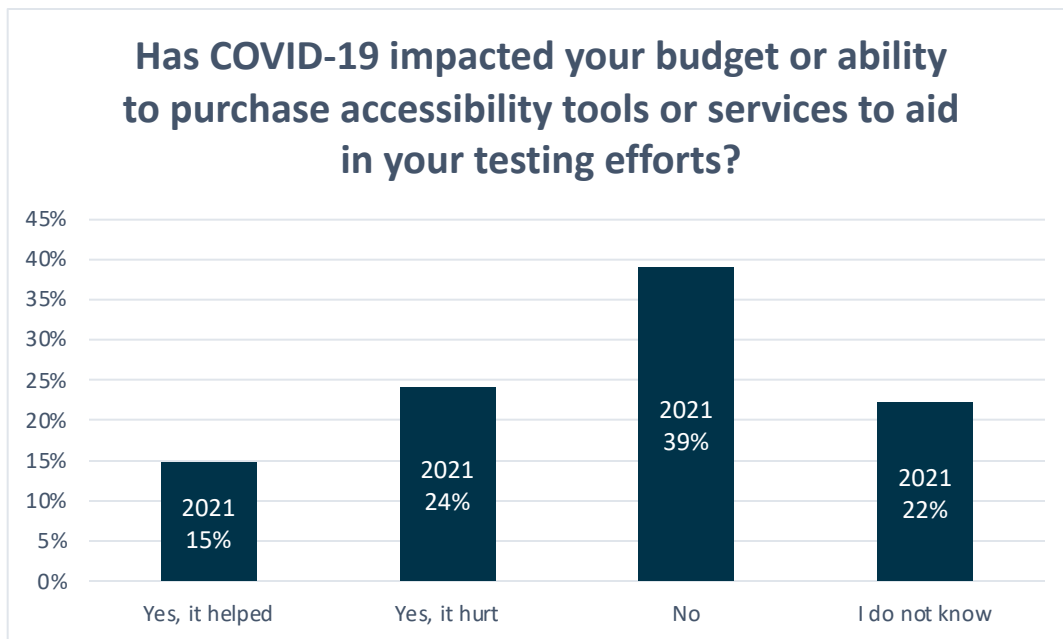This is also supported in a number of open-ended responses:

"The pandemic helped spur us towards providing more digital services. We were already moving in that area but we were forced to use it."

"COVID has prompted a broader (accessibility) realization, but it's clearly just the beginning. The uptick and steady stream of teams we've had reaching out for (accessibility) support has only continued to rise, and seemingly not waning as we approach another school year."

"We have been working on accessibility for several years, the pandemic has only helped us realize more things we can be doing and refining the processes we do use to make them more efficient."

COVID-19 creates opportunity to grow accessibility but with little supporting resources

With increased reliance on digital channels throughout the pandemic, respondents indicated an increase in internal digital accessibility complaints. This trend is supported by an increase in ADA lawsuits over the same time period. And yet, despite the increased risk and demand for digital accessibility from users, 24% of our respondents reported their accessibility testing budgets were decreased, while 39% said that budgets remained flat throughout the pandemic.

Has COVID-19 impacted your budget or ability to purchase accessibility tools or services to aid in your testing efforts?

It may be safe to assume that the pandemic's impact on economic uncertainty is to blame for the underfunding and resources to proportionately support the demand for digital accessibility. Further evidence may be the brief popularity of low-cost accessibility widgets, which promise complete automated compliance despite evidence to the contrary.

Immaturity may also be a factor, with 22% of respondents who said they lack visibility into digital accessibility resourcing. When asked in 2020, 35% of respondents hadn't yet tried to purchase tools or services to aid in their testing efforts. Looking back at the digital boom from 2020 through 2021, it may be safe to assume these were the first two years these organizations have recognized the need at all.

One respondent explains: "There is still very low awareness of what digital accessibility means at executive level - it is often lumped with digital inclusion (which has priority) and assumed to be just a synonym of this. So no action plan is created or resources allocated to address this specific branch of 'inclusion'."

Now is the time to act

The survey suggests that COVID-19 has significantly increased the importance of digital channels. Additionally, respondents, the majority of which are Accessibility Specialists, are buried with digital accessibility work (more than was expected) with 96% of them predicting this workload will continue or increase through the end of the year.

This survey also suggests that more users with disabilities are reporting the barriers they encounter when attempting to access digital services. For organizations who are

evaluating their legal risk, it may be safe to assume that the more digital accessibility complaints they get, the more at risk they are for formal legal action.

The first survey in 2020 concluded that heightened awareness on the impact of digital accessibility may not mean action is concurrently taking place within organizations, but may have served as a catalyst for change. Now, one year later, responses looking back suggest this is true. However, continued increase in workload volume without the increased resources to support them appears troubling. The demand and motivation to practice accessibility is here in part due to this pandemic. The time to improve the web and reduce risk is now.