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How Accessible Is Your Recruiting Technology?

By Roy Maurer 4/20/2016   Permissions

The Labor Department's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) recently unveiled free
online resources and toolkits to help employers improve the accessibility of their web-based job
applications for job seekers with disabilities.

The resources site is called TalentWorks (http://www.peatworks.org/talentworks) and was created
by the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology (PEAT), a government-funded
initiative promoting the employment, retention and career advancement of people with disabilities
through the development of accessible technology.

"With resources like TalentWorks, employers can build a diverse, more inclusive workforce by
ensuring their organization's virtual door is open to everyone," said Deputy Labor Secretary Chris
Lu.

"It's simple," said Josh Christianson, PEAT's project director and a partner at Ethos Strategic
Consulting in Washington, D.C. "Accessible online recruiting tools equate to better talent
acquisition. If your online job advertisements, applications, screening tools and digital interviewing
processes are not accessible to those with disabilities, you are effectively excluding certain
individuals from applying for jobs at your company," he said. "This can expose you to legal risk, and
more importantly, it limits the pool of talent you'll be able to consider for open positions."

TalentWorks provides general information and tips for enhancing the accessibility of talent
acquisition technology, as well as resources on how to buy and build accessibility products, assess
technology accessibility practices, and create an accessibility policy for online job seekers.

"One of the great things about PEAT's TalentWorks is the simple and often free or low-cost accessibility accommodations it recommends," said Gabby Nagle, community marketing specialist for GettingHired, an employment resource for people with disabilities (http://www.gettinghired.com/). Nagle said that for employers, the issue is largely a lack of awareness of the need for accessibility. In addition, "a common misconception is that accessibility measures are costly and difficult to implement."

In a 2015 survey PEAT conducted of 427 people with disabilities, respondents said:

- Employers and technology providers underestimate the need for accessible online job applications.
- Employers fail to look beyond the job application form itself when thinking of accessibility, including processes related to job sourcing, pre-employment testing and digital interviews.
- Built-in accessibility features sometimes are lost when vendors customize and install recruiting software.
- Employers believe that if a website complies with regulatory guidelines, then it meets the needs of users. In other words, they believe that accessibility is about compliance, not usability.

"Where to draw the line between accessibility and usability is extremely difficult," said Peter Wallack, senior director of the accessibility program at Oracle. "Of course the ultimate goal of our work is to make products that people with disabilities can use, but whether any specific person succeeds is influenced by variables that we cannot control, such as how a system is customized, the assistive technology each user relies on, the amount of training the user has received on that assistive technology, and reasonable accommodations that an employer may make for each employee."

Challenges for Job Seekers

The PEAT survey found that 46 percent of respondents rated their last experience applying for a job online as "difficult to impossible." Of those, 9 percent were unable to complete the application and 24 percent required assistance from the employer. Of those applicants who required assistance, 58 percent were still unable to finish the application.

The types of disabilities, as self-reported by the respondents, were as follows:

- Cognitive and/or intellectual disabilities—29 percent.
- Deaf or hard of hearing—26 percent.
- Physical and/or motor disabilities—21 percent.
- "Other" or declined to state their disability—14 percent.
- Blind or having a visual impairment—10 percent.

"The biggest challenges I encounter when dealing with online job applications are design and development-related problems," said Sassy Outwater, a Boston-based advocate for small business digital accessibility, who is blind.

Problems include improperly labeled links and buttons, image-based parts of the application, untagged PDF files, and edit fields without accessible character-limit instructions, such as year fields that require two characters instead of four.

Some of the common difficulties job seekers with disabilities experience are:

- Complex navigation and timeout restrictions.
- Poor screen contrast.
- Applications that relied on color, graphics or text embedded with graphics to convey directions or important information.
- Images that conveyed information, but did not have alternative text for individuals using screen readers.
- Applications that could not be navigated with keystrokes and required using a mouse.
- Videos or audio instructions that were not closed captioned.
- CAPTCHA tests—used to determine whether or not the user is human—without an audio option.
- Lack of information on how to request an accommodation.

"If we don't teach our companies and developers how to spot inaccessibility before products are released, we cut off access to employment for millions of otherwise well-qualified candidates," Outwater said. "We have to start educating developers and executives purchasing software on what to look for in a good, accessible application."

Wallack said that Oracle is addressing accessibility by incorporating the Section 508 (http://www.section508.gov/) and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2.0 level AA (http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/) into the company's development processes. "We invest heavily in training our development organizations on how to do this work, and we have a centralized team of subject matter experts available to assist. Most of our effort is done at the framework level for each technology stack, making each interactive component accessible, and then that same code is deployed hundreds or thousands of times in each of the application products," he said.

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