

IxDA Sydney Podcast

S02 E03 - Kate Linton

Audio Transcript

Kate: [00:00:00] If you are looking at acquiring new customers, then there's 15% potentially of customers with disabilities and their families and their carers who are more likely to use your products and services if you ensure that they're accessible.

Vinita: Hello, and welcome to the IxDA Sydney podcast, a show where we can't guarantee answers, just better questions. I'm Vinita Israni, and in this episode, Jessica and Sam are joined by Kate Linton, the Global Design Lead at ThoughtWorks. Kate's background in graphic design, UX, and branding. Guides teams in creating consistent, intuitive and accessible customer experiences for brand worldwide.

We'll explore the critical role of accessibility in creating successful digital products and services. We'll dive into the challenges of working with stakeholders to ensure accessibility isn't an afterthought. Ensure tips on taking [00:01:00] neurodiversity into account when making important design choices.

Let's get started.

Jessica: Good morning, Kate. Thanks for making time today. Super, super excited to chat with you today.

Kate: Thanks Jessica. And yeah, thank you for inviting me. I'm so excited to be talking to you today and your audience. So I'm head of design at ThoughtWorks. I've been with ThoughtWorks for over 11 years now.

And. I'm a career designer. I've worked across many aspects of design, starting with print and then going through to digital, and it's really through digital that I've started to focus a lot around digital accessibility.

Jessica: I guess in, in terms of you know, I, it sounds like you've dabbled a lot in different realms of design, and I guess what, what was your journey like, just stepping into inclusive design and accessibility, and how did you kind of get started in that?

Kate: Yeah. Well [00:02:00] it's, it's interesting because accessibility is not new at all. Yeah. When you're talking about digital. So you know, I've been working in design for over 30 years, and it was in the nineties that I first got into digital. I went back to uni and did a multimedia course, and, and back in the nineties, the The web accessibility initiative was established Tim Burners Lee established that really for people like designers and developers to ensure that the digital products and websites that we're building could be used by everyone.

And so, Back then we WIC ag was set up the web content accessibility guidelines, and we've had various additions of that as it gets updated and as technology changes. But it's

really been there for overage. It's a long time. [00:03:00] And so that's when I first got exposed to accessibility in the context of creating semantic code for websites.

So it's really not new. However, I think over the last couple of years with the pandemic and with the greater need to be able to transact and to do everything online, really accessibility has been in the spotlight now because if, if you can't provide. Products and services to customers online, then it's really gonna set you back as a, a business or, or a company.

So it's, it is in the spotlight, I believe at the moment. .

Jessica: Mm-hmm. . Yeah, for sure. I think, I think there's been a lot of interesting I guess evolving bet, like from accessibility to inclusive design and really including different components of how we think about accessibility. I am really curious to kind of hear a little bit.

[00:04:00] More about when you said you did a lot of cementing coding what, what did that involve? Like what was that like?

Kate: Well, I'm not a coder , so I, I understand the basics of H T M L. Mm-hmm. and I, and so as a digital designer, it is really important to understand. How HTML works so that you can design good digital products and, and apps and digital services.

So, For myself, I work alongside developers, pair with front end developers, but I don't code myself. And the the basics of H T M L and semantic, H T M L Well documented, and over the years we've complicated a lot with content management tools and new platforms, and we've tried to make it easy for developers, but we [00:05:00] haven't always made it easier for the end user.

Particularly in terms of ensuring that the basics of HTML and the original intentions are preserved in terms of accessibility.

Jessica: Mm-hmm. , mm-hmm. and these labels in the codes actually eventually would translate to how screen readers would pick up some of this content. Right?

Kate: Indeed. So, screen readers, People that perhaps haven't used a screen reader before, although I imagine many people have, because when you use Apple voiceover or when you talk to Siri on your device, you're using a screen reader.

But they, they work in a very similar way to other web crawlers like search engines. So they crawl all over your website on your code, and they navigate your content. And so you need to ensure that, for example, your heading hierarchy [00:06:00] is in the right order. Every page needs to begin with an H one. These are essential for search engine optimization, but they're also the.

Parts of navigation for screen readers to really understand the content. Mm-hmm. . Yeah.



Jessica: Actually, I, I think it, it's interesting to think how a lot of this assistive technology have existed for a long time and I, I don't think it's really I don't think it's something we've really thought about, but we realize.

Kind of designing for those accessibility and those needs have extended to our daily lives today. Especially what you mentioned with the changes in Covid. And I think as things get more and more convenient, like I talk to my Google home I do abuse it a little bit sometimes, but talking to my Google home a lot and, you know, being able to get results just like that and all of that, I'm, I'm sure, We all have a big part to play in making content more accessible.

And I think it's just, yeah, it's just so great to kind of see how things are evolving and I think, I think I've, [00:07:00] I've I've read a handful of the blogs and ThoughtWorks as well. And also watched, actually I watched one of the videos you had on YouTube and I think the other thing you mentioned was also like closed captioning was something that existed for a long time and.

Again, like it's just something that we use like without thinking and take for granted today. You know?

Kate: Yeah. Closed captioning is so interesting. It's a great example of what we often call the, the curb cut effect. So when you, that little ramp on street corners, That is designed for wheels for people in wheelchairs originally.

That really helps everyone because no one wants to trip on a curb when they're crossing the road. And similarly close captions are so useful for everyone. I have them on all the time when I watch television or when I'm on Netflix. They're just so useful for people. [00:08:00] Even if you don't have an A hearing impairment.

So they've really come into their own over the last two years because as increasingly, everyone is online and we're all on teams calls for work or Zoom calls. We really rely on the closed captions and they're useful. Just, you know, sometimes if English isn't your first language, you might use the closed captions, but they were originally designed for.

People who are deaf or who have a hearing impairment. Yeah,

Jessica: definitely. I guess I'd love to segue a little bit more into I guess the work that you do at ThoughtWorks today and being able to grow that practice and accessibility to

Kate: design. Yeah, it's been a real journey for ThoughtWorks. We've always had.

Capability around accessibility, but in [00:09:00] increasingly, it's become an area of focus for us starting internally, but then also providing that service to clients and. What really put the spotlight on accessibility for us internally was when we joined the Fast 500 who commit to providing inclusive and accessible environments and platforms for people, including at the workplace.



So we, we joined that 18 months ago, and as part of that, we made a public commitment to provide accessible and inclusive services and workplace for our people. And alongside that, We've also been very focused on inclusive hiring. In some regions. We now have targets for people with disabilities, and in [00:10:00] doing that, we really needed to ensure that our own internal platforms were accessible and easy for people to use.

So, . We have been on a journey and it's very much a journey. We're not there yet. There's so much more that we need to do. Mm-hmm. . But part of that is building awareness. So we've internally on our learning management system, published lots and lots of interviews and videos with our own people. To raise awareness around what it's like if you, you have a disability, how you navigate the world, how you access content, and, and so that's been really helpful just to get thought workers to understand how to work with colleagues if they have a disability.

Reminding people to always enable closed captions when you set up Zoom call. Or a meeting. [00:11:00] When we have really big meetings, we also invite people to, to do the sign language, which is not a universal language. So different regions have their own sign language. So we, we ensure that we. Provide that service as well.

And it really started looking inwards to how we could ensure that everyone in ThoughtWorks is able to engage and find what they need and work and, and access information and, and content and applications that they need to do their work. And, and since then, we've also been looking at how we can bake accessibility into.

Digital products and services that we build for our clients, and whilst we've always had those capabilities, they haven't been universally applied, and there's lots of different reasons for that. Some clients [00:12:00] push back, they don't see the value in the extra effort that is involved to ensure that the the product meets accessibility guidelines.

because there's it. It's additional work that you need to do. There's additional research and testing that needs to be done, both manual and automated testing, but what we've discovered is that once, once people have those skills within a team, within a product team, then. They, they're going to do it regardless of whether , you know, a client, Robert Stamps said, yes, we must meet AA accessibility and you, you're just gonna go ahead and do it.

So really building up the capability in the skills comes first. And then any awkward conversations with management about why accessibility is important, that that's kind of, The thing [00:13:00] that you need to do next. And, and for most of our clients, they, they, they see the need for this. And it's increasingly a requirement for a lot of clients, particularly in the public sector, but also any, any business providing an essential service.

So financial services, a lot of areas of retail like grocery, you really must. Comply. You know, these services are protected by disability discrimination law in many countries, including Australia. So Yeah, so the first step is really to ensure that you have the right skills and tools, and secondly, to ensure that you are building it in and having the right conversations to ensure that work is prioritized.

So as working in consultancy my whole career, I'm, I'm, I'm a little bit skeptical as to how, as a consultant I can look at [00:14:00] tying in accessibility by stakeholders to see the value. Understand that it is something that stakeholders do have to be cognizant of when using large enterprise sites, but how would you tie that into a unique value?

Yeah, there's, there's different arguments that you can use. My preferred argument for accessibility is that it's a, an amazing opportunity to extend your reach. I, if you are looking at acquiring new customers, then there's 15%. Potentially of customers with disabilities and their families and their carers who are more likely to use your products and services if you ensure that they're accessible.

So what an amazing opportunity to expand your customer base by providing more accessible services. So that's the first argument that I lead with is, you know, there's an up an amazing [00:15:00] upside if you commit to doing this. If that's still a hurdle. And sometimes, you know, a lot of the work that we do is creating products for internal use for enterprises, and sometimes, you know, the value isn't as obvious, but even in those situations, I, I tend to use an inclusive design argument.

And the inclusive design argument is that by improving, The accessibility for that 15% of people that actually are living with a dis a permanent disability, you're actually improving it for everyone. So that's really that curb cut argument that ensuring it's easy for the people on the margins of your customer base, and they're the ones that you know, they're the ones who are the stress cases.

For the usability of your products and services, [00:16:00] but by ensuring that they can use it, you're actually making it more usable for everyone else as well. So an example of that would be people with vision impairment. Now I wear glasses, so does most people over 50. That's 65% of adults wear glasses. Now, if you improve your text, ensure that your font size is minimum of 18 point across all of your websites and, and apps.

And if you ensure that it's really high contrast. Ideally black text on white or a contrast threshold that someone whose colorblind can read, then you're actually improving it for the majority of your adult audience. And so that's the secondary argument that I would use. And hopefully you don't need to then talk about [00:17:00] the risk of being su.

Because that should be your last defense. That's you know, that's taking a baseball bat to the meeting with your with your exec. So ideally you don't have to draw on that, but that is also an important consideration. and I, I guess in terms of when mashing this out, I'm, I'm guessing you would be doing this across like the onset of a, of a, of a project and these goals will be defined from, from the beginning.

They wouldn't be an enough thought, right. Ideally, you need to start early. If you're thinking about accessibility, it's actually. Quite hard to change a digital product or service after it's already launched. The cost and the effort is gonna be way more than if you just bake accessibility in from the start.

So at ThoughtWorks we refer to that as shifting left. [00:18:00] On accessibility, and it really starts at the very beginning or what we call product discovery. When you are researching



your users and at that stage, you need to start bringing in real data about people with disabilities. And ensuring that those people are included in the research and design of your digital products and services.

And if you're not doing that, then you're going to just start accumulating debt. In terms of the effort that you'll need to eventually ensure that your, your product meets those accessibility guidelines. Okay? So would it almost be on the same page as like mobile first? Design. So instead of going in there with like a mobile first design, you are going in there with a mobile first and accessibility first perspective.

Yeah, it's, that's a good analogy. [00:19:00] And another analogy I like as well as the mobile first is security first. And ensuring that you are building security in right from the start so that your customer data is protected and that you're only collecting the data that you really. On those customers and you know, minimizing the risk of the data breach.

So these are all first class concerns, and if you don't prioritize them from the beginning, then you just increase your risk over time. It certainly goes hand in hand with that mobile first approach. Benefit of tying it in with, with mobile is that mobile devices are really, many of them designed for accessibility.

And you know, a lot of people who live with disabilities, they, they depend on their. Smartphones [00:20:00] because they enable them to transact and engage with the world. So, so it makes sense, you know, if you've got modern digital products and services, you need to be doing this. And

Jessica: what about for I think you mentioned, you know, obviously the, the earlier to bake it into the process.

Is, is definitely, it goes a long way in terms of, you know, de-risking things and not having I guess technical and design debt further down the road. But what about for clients where you kind of, you know, just start with them to, to even raise awareness and how do you eventually bake it into the process when it's not the practice that they currently do?

Kate: Yeah, it's. It's difficult parti, particularly with new products and services. So clients often will be right at the start of that product journey where they, they have a hypothesis and they want to prove out the hypothesis that there's a real market fit for this product idea or the product feature.

And and [00:21:00] so often we. Work with clients from that initial idea to launching the product in the market. And clients at that stage don't want to gold plate their product. They've got an M V P approach and you know, they're just going from the minimal viable or marketable product that they can get out there.

That can be a more challenging conversation because they really don't want to spend that 10% extra in effort. And it's often, often it's not even 10%. If you've got a team, a product team that understand accessibility and their default way of working is to ensure that the product is accessible, then it's it's actually less than 10.

Of the effort and time, often it gets deprioritized. So it is, it's a difficult conversation, but if you've, it'll, it will be made easier if your team already [00:22:00] have the right skills to do this.

Jessica: Yeah. I think that kind of leads back to the conversation. I guess you were, you were saying, you know, with raising awareness and, and just, I guess, extending.

Notion of, you know, when you're designing for accessibility. And, and this reminds me of something that I've read from the book Mismatch because it was very much that principle of design for one extend to many. And I think one of the things I touched on on the book as well is actually when you're designing with that lens, you're also designing for a potential future self because disability, you know, comes in many different levels.

With visual impairment. For example, I'm, I'm wearing contacts right now, but I, I definitely, when I take all my glasses, I'm just like squinting and I, I can't even see a label in front of me. And so I think at some point in our lives we experience different levels of disability. Some of them could be I guess temporary situations and situational Hmm.

And permanent. And so I think when you apply that lens, you know, you are designing for a version of your future self or. A current self, I think. I think that [00:23:00] makes things a lot more relatable, but, but obviously that, that awareness takes time.

Kate: Yeah. The awareness does take time, but if you wanna fast track awareness, talk to someone with a disability mm-hmm.

and watch how they use their devices and their digital products. So that's how you can fast track that because thinking about your future self, We don't spend a lot of time doing that. Particularly when we're young and our industry is dominated by designers and developers that are. Early in their careers and they're not thinking about their future self all the time.

Yeah. They're not thinking about their superannuation, they're not thinking along those terms, but put them in front of someone who is blind and asking them to, you know, observe how that person is using the digital product or. That they're designing. That's a real [00:24:00] eye opener. That's your opportunity to start understanding what it's like and similar for.

You know, the, those temporary and situational disabilities. Mm-hmm. , the one I often refer to for situational is just intermittent wifi or, you know, poor access to data. This is something that we all experience and when that happens, the images are gonna be displayed last. And your, your c s s might not load.

So think about what does your product look like if you actually turn off the c s s, what does it look like if you don't have the images displaying? That's a really common scenario. It's akin to a situational disability and it's something that we all experience. Having that firsthand experience of disability can [00:25:00] really drive awareness, and I hesitate to use the word, but empathy.

We, it's an overused term when we think about product design, but that's probably more effective than just thinking about your future self your future. Yeah, for sure. You, you will experience a disability statistically you will mm-hmm. . But we're, a lot of us, thankfully a long way away from that happening.

Yeah.

Jessica: That, that's so true actually. Yeah, I mean, I can't even figure out what to eat for dinner sometimes tomorrow. So , I guess that future is a little bit too far. But I, I think, I guess, In terms of the different types of accessibility, I think there's also something I'm, I'm still trying to understand a bit more and read about recently, which is more the invisible, I guess, kinds of disability where it might have to be a bit more to do with I guess autism for example, and, and these kind of things like really trying to understand that.

That side of the

Kate: spectrum. Yeah, and we spoke and interviewed a lot of colleagues [00:26:00] within ThoughtWorks that have various different types of neurodiversity, and we learned a lot. It changes the way you think about designing content. For example, thinking about the language that we use. And I work in an industry where our language must sound like jargon.

You know, we talk in acronyms all the time. When you talk to someone who works in technology, their language is just sprinkled with acronyms. That's really non-inclusive language, and a lot of our audiences. Be quite technically capable, but the widespread use of acronyms is actually, it's quite an arrogant way to to talk to your audience is, you know, if you are as smart as me, you'll understand what I'm talking about.

That position is, it's a really [00:27:00] bad assumption to have and it doesn't serve you well if, if you've. If you're talking to someone with a whole range of neuro neurodiversity issues, so So just slowing down and actually spelling out your acronyms when you have printed content, maybe spelling them out in full once, and then putting the acronym in in brackets.

That's what we're trying to. Always remember to do in our written content. And really it helps everyone because when you presented with a whole lot of acronyms, you do have to mentally slow down, and it is a little cognitive hurdle that you put in the way of people understanding what you're talking about.

Because you're asking people to remember what that acronym means, and it can be a complete disaster for screen readers because not all screen readers interpret acronyms in the same way. [00:28:00] So some screen readers might just think it's a word. So a p l becomes happy. It's something that we've had to really think about, and it's certainly a journey because you're talking about quite a big organizational change, when it comes to the way you describe your work.

And so. You know, other things for neurodiversity. As a designer, I've really had to think carefully about using animation and video on digital products and, and on our website because automated videos that just play and. Can't be easily paused or stopped. They're, they're really distracting for a lot of people and some people just can't concentrate or



complete their task if there's flashing animation going on, ensuring that videos can be controlled by the user, and that [00:29:00] animation is.

To a minimum so that the animation is there for a clear purpose. And these are all considerations now that we need to make and to hopefully form better design decisions right at the start.

Jessica: Yeah, for sure. I think a lot of the things that you mentioned are pretty much table stakes today. You know, we really need to have these as our core principles and thinking about it like I, yeah, I do realize like designers have actually so much power to, to make things a lot better or a lot worse, but hopefully better based on, you know, your how you're growing thought worse.

being able to build that culture of accessibility and having that awareness internally, I think it'd be great if we could dig into that a little bit more. I think you've touched on it very early on, and

Kate: firstly, it's very much a journey. So we still have a lot of plans in, in terms of enabling product teams to bake accessibility in or ship left, but.[00:30:00]

Have this year started introducing accessibility as a sensible, what we call a sensible default practice. So by doing that, it means that product teams really need to discuss. Accessibility requirements right at the start during discovery or during the, what we call the inception of the engagement.

This gives product teams the opportunity to talk about. Accessibility with their stakeholders and you, the way we position it is you need a good reason to not do it. The other thing that we are doing is measuring the way that we are doing accessibility. So We introduced accessibility into a quarterly survey that we send out to all of our product teams to ask them whether they're incorporating accessibility into their products.

And what [00:31:00] that's doing is just setting a baseline so that we understand where we are today and we can start addressing some of the gaps. And then other things that we're doing, we are building out checklists and we're creating more detailed handbooks for different roles because as a capability, it's different for a front-end developer versus a designer.

You need. Different skills and different tools. So so we've started to do a lot of work in that area as well. And

Jessica: yeah. I'm curious to hear about these handbooks

Kate: yeah. Well, the first handbook that we did and that we rolled out to over a hundred people was the marketing handbook on accessibility. So we delivered training to.

All of our marketers in every region of ThoughtWorks. So that's, you know, 18 countries [00:32:00] and And that handbook just describes in detail how to ensure that we incorporate

accessibility into all of our marketing channels. We also introduced a checkpoint into content production process, so, Now in, we use Adobe at ThoughtWorks.

So AEM is our content management system, and we introduced into the workflow a checkpoint where a trained human actually has to approve what goes onto the website to ensure that it meets our accessibility guidelines. So that was the first thing that we did. And we're in the process now of thinking, well, what does.

Product designer need to ensure that we can deliver accessible products and and services. And similarly for front end engineers, [00:33:00] what, what do they need? And typically it, we use slightly different tools. For example, you know, we use Lighthouse a lot for our automated accessibility tests. But also we use.

Ax, we use wave. These different tools often give slightly different results, so it's actually quite good to have a suite of different products. Mm-hmm. . And the other thing is a lot of accessibility tools are free. They're available, you know, screen readers are available. So those are some of the things that we're doing to ensure that practitioners have, have the tools that they need.

Jessica: And, and do you find that I guess with these resources and handbooks especially rolling out. Across different countries. Like do you find that you ha you kind of have to make a few changes to either localize a little bit or guess just kind of be a bit more specific to certain cultures? Like do you find that you have to make these kind of variations?

Kate: We do. For example, [00:34:00] in China, accessibility is not as prevalent as in other regions. As an example, social media doesn't have built in accessibility for things like alt tags. So we had to modify training because marketers don't have the ability to put alt text onto every image when, when you're on social.

I think that will change. With WIC ag, it's kind of like the Bible for digital accessibility, but who enjoys reading the Bible? You know, , it's really hard to get around. It's, it's just really super detailed and so that's why we are creating our, our own checklist. Just to simplify it for people so that, so that they can quickly find what they need.

And if they do need to then do a deep dive [00:35:00] into Wick Ag, then they can mm-hmm. . But yeah, we're just trying to make it a little bit easier.

Jessica: Yeah, I, I actually, I reckon some sort of immersive onboarding might be a cool idea as well. I, I, I make a lot of references to tv, but I I remember this one movie that I watched basically the, it, it, it's it's, it's a couple and obviously the wife is.

Pregnant and they're going to the classes together. And so they'd get the husband to put on the weight on, on this, on their bellies just to feel kind of what that actual pregnancy experience is like and to be able to understand their partner better. So that, that, anyway funny that came to mind, but I was just thinking some sort of immersive onboarding I think would be super cool when it comes to, you know, educating employees and helping them understand like what disability really means.

Yeah. And what you mentioned earlier about. The quickest way to fast track is actually really just to, to, you know, talk to someone who has that type of disability or whatever you're trying to understand.

Yeah.

Kate: Yeah. And so we, you know, We're mostly working, [00:36:00] distributed nowadays after the pandemic, everyone's working from home.

And so it, it introduces so many challenges because before the pandemic, you would go out and do primary research with your users. You would actually meet with them in person and usability research increasingly. All done online. It's often asynchronous and so it's a little bit more challenging sometimes to get direct exposure and contact with your users who, who have disabilities.

What we're doing in Australia is we're working with companies like Intop who actually conduct the research. People with disabilities, and that's been fantastic. They've been able to recruit and find people so that we can test our products, so that can be really helpful as well as if you [00:37:00] find a partner like Intop or Vision Australia is another one that have that service where they can go out and test your product with range.

People with disabilities, that can be fantastic as well. Having those partners in place to work with.

Jessica: What are some other things that you, you know, often recommend for people to learn more about disability and just. Improve and be better.

Kate: I would highly recommend dq. We've worked with dq. They provide training.

So we've, we've actually had them provide training for design teams and they. Also provide services around accessibility. They have a wealth of training that you can do, so they, they package it up for different roles. I recently did their training specifically for marketers and that was [00:38:00] really helpful when I was writing the Handbook for Marketers.

So, so they're fantastic organization. Content is globally available and it, it doesn't cost much. It's, it's great. So I personally use dq, but then there's also so much content online that's just readily available on the topic of accessibility. And there's a lot of niche areas, like, for example, accessibility for mobile apps, and all of the, the information is fairly available.

Also just download the free tools and start using them. I use an an alley tool in Chrome that enables me to quickly look at content through various different lenses from examining alt texts through to understanding color contrast and, [00:39:00] and semantic code. So, Start, you know, using some of those free tools.

There's, there's a range that are available. We use I use that little alley tool, but there's also Ax, there's Wave, there's Lighthouse. Some of them work better in different browsers, but



yeah, just start doing it, just . Start raising your awareness with what's fairly available. And another thing that I encourage people to do is just start putting alt text on your social media.

If, if you're uploading images, it's just something that's so easy to do. Also, things like your tools like PowerPoint Microsoft have really prioritized accessibility, and if you are creating PowerPoint presentations, then it's so easy to. Put the alt text in. Same with the Google [00:40:00] platform. So Google slides it.

They've made it much easier to create accessible content and really it's there, it's available. So yeah, start, start using it. If we all got just a little bit better, it would make such an enormous difference for people.

Vinita: And that concludes our latest episode of the IxDA Sydney podcast. You can find the audio transcript for this episode as well as any resources mentioned at ixdasydney.org.

Kate: I'm Kate Linton, and you've been listening to the IxDA Sydney Podcast.