# Transcript for Accessible Procurement with Liz Heaney of Google

Key:

* RFP means Request for Proposal
* PO means Purchase Order (system)
* ACR means Accessibility Conformance Report
* WCAG means Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
* VPAT means Voluntary Product Accessibility Template
* SOW means Statement of Work
* PMO means Project Management Office

Mark Walker

Hey, Liz, thank you so much for joining us. You're over in California, I think, aren't you?

Liz Heaney

Yes, San Francisco.

Mark Walker

Perfect. Well, thank you so much for coming in and joining us for this conversation. I'm going to be asking you about procurement and accessibility in procurement, and obviously we're really keen to hear your tips and ideas and experience of your work that relates to that. But could you first just tell me a little bit about your role and how that connects in to accessibility at Google?

Liz Heaney

Sure. Well, as you can see, I'm Liz Heaney. I head the Core Accessibility Programmes team. Core is the area of Google that produces our internal tools as well as some external facing ones. My scope also includes ensuring that the third party products purchased by Google are vetted for accessibility. So I own the third party procurement process from an accessibility standpoint, and my team's mission is ensuring that Google is the best place to work for people with disabilities.

Mark Walker

Cool. Do you have a specialist background in accessibility or procurement? I mean, how did you end up in that seat with those two things joined together?

Liz Heaney

I know. No, I just was looking at this job and it appealed to me from I just feel passionate about ensuring everybody can have a level playing field when they work. So I've not been exposed to accessibility before. I've been learning. I'm lucky that at Google we have a lot of ways and tools for learning, so I've been just reading and watching and listening a lot.

Mark Walker

Cool. Just to make sense of that, then. So there's the accessibility piece broadly, and you're part of the jigsaw about making sure that what Google provides externally and internally from what you're saying, is your principal focus about the systems for employees, or is it more broadly around the way that products and services are made accessible more generally?

Liz Heaney

Because it's Google, I have a peer that works with the other rest of the we call them Pas, so different organisations who mostly do external products. So I focus on the Core, which is a pretty big area, but mostly the scope is then for the products that all of our Googlers use, and when we buy a third party product, all of our Googlers use them as well. Right. In some cases, we may build a product on top of that third party and then external users use them as well. But because we use all of our products, those impact our internal users as well. So I think for third party, it felt like this was an area that would fall under my purview.

Mark Walker

Cool and you're talking about quite a large number of users, presumably, in terms of Google employees. Just remind me, what do you think of in terms of the number of people you're trying to cater for? Tens of thousands, presumably.

Liz Heaney

Well, yeah. And disabilities are many times invisible, so people don't see people with disabilities a lot. But just if you look at Google, there's the population of a small city. Right. And like I mentioned, some of our products do go worldwide, so we have a lot of products now that reach over a billion users.

Mark Walker

Wow.

Liz Heaney

And in that case, the swap is a lot bigger of people that you might hit who have a disability. So it's important work. Cool right. I always wanted to make it fairness is one of my biggest core values.

Mark Walker

Cool well, and I think that passion that brings everybody to the table for accessibility is clearly there in your case. So tell me about procurement in Google. I mean, is there a particular way that Google goes about making decisions in terms of the software that it's buying? Are you sort of following a blueprint in terms of your role?

Liz Heaney

I don't know about blueprint. There's two ways in which products come to Google. There's a third way, which would be like, if I want to buy just one licence, so I'm going to ignore that, because I don't think that that impacts people with Disabilities. Presumably you wouldn't be buying a product you don't know that you can't use. But mostly there's RFP, so Request for Proposal and we use a lot of acronyms in the US, so do stop me whenever you hear one you're not familiar with. So the Request for Proposal is the most standard way there could be. Like I mentioned before, maybe leader of an organisation that's used a product somewhere else and no wants to buy it here and will come through the PO (Purchase Order system). Then for the RFP, we worked with Procurement to add questions with regards to accessibility right there and then, so that when you compare vendors, you can see the WCAG 2.1 AA. Do they have Accessibility Conformance Report, which I'll say ACR or like what is their process for addressing issues? Will they give us access to their systems to smoke test them? So once we select a vendor, there's also a Tools Governance Team that we have at Google to see if we're trying to buy something that's already in existence in our ecosystem so that we don't have a proliferation of tools. So that's another place where we have talked to that team to make sure that we look at accessibility as one of the governance items and then it comes to our team at the time of launch.

Well, sorry, there is a step ahead. Like I mentioned, if they do give us an ACR, which is that Accessibility Conformance Report, we will still smoke test the product to make sure that it is accessible, any bugs or issues, then the person procuring the software will work with a vendor to try and get those solved before launch. I think this is the best part or the best time where you can hold a vendor accountable to making the product accessible because they're interested in the sale.

Mark Walker

So just to check on the smoke test thing, because that's not a phrase I'm familiar with. There's two questions. One is what it consists of, the other one is within the process. Are you suggesting that you're doing the test before you've told them that you're going to choose their product? Or are you somewhere in the process where you've made enough decisions with your ACR that you think, hey, this is the right thing, but we're now going to make sure that they put right anything before we bring it in?

Liz Heaney

I guess that's a line somewhere, isn't. It, in the decision? It is, because testing is expensive, as you might know, and so we can't just test all the 13 products. So we want to make the you do have some answers, like I said on the RFP, that will give you an indication. Like if they don't know if they're WCAG 2.1 compliant, odds are that their software, for example, so once we get to the short few smoke testing, really is just like a cursory test of the main walk through scenario for making the main activity you want to do, getting that done. So we don't test the entirety of the software because that would be, like I said, expensive and really it's the responsibility of the vendor. But many times even though they have an ACR or completed what they call many people call it VPAT, but even though they have one, sometimes the person completing it has no formation in accessibility. So they go like is there enough contrast? And they go looks like it to me. I feel like it's important to still test those just to make sure that what you're getting is a good ACR and that people, when they get the software we're obviously testing in a test version so it's before you purchase so that when people get on the software they'll be able to perform their activity.

Mark Walker

That's interesting. So that's really helpful to dive in a bit on that detail because I can imagine that people are saying to themselves well, if you don't know whether you're WCAG compliant, you're not is generally if I ask you and you don't know the answer, you're probably not. You might be by accident. So that discounts a load of people. But then the next bit that you're describing is how much time and effort do you put into deciding how accessible the particular user journeys are that you're describing in your case, is that the lion's share of the work that you're doing? Because that's quite a lot of time and effort needed on, I don't know, maybe there's two or three candidates at that point or do you wait until it's just the one and the decision has been made?

Liz Heaney

I'm leaning towards when it's like one to two. Like if you're between two, sure we don't want to do too many. I don't know what lion share I will say Google does do a lot of their own development of tools so there isn't that many that come here. We do a lot of testing for other teams that don't have accessibility analysts within Google. So I would say the lion's share of our work is testing our internal products and new versions of them that keep coming up to make sure they remain accessible. And yes, we get this occasional request for third party which we do do this kind of testing. We try to push that to the vendor to use an accessibility company to do their testing. Someone that specialises in it like such as AbilityNet would, it seems but we have level access and a few that we know that do good testing. But yeah, we do the smoke testing. Yeah.

Mark Walker

So the smoke testing then is more of your at the screen yourselves. I mean, in our case, what I've done a couple of times when we've been facing this internally is ask someone to buy colleague who's a screen reader user to do something and then it's an initial test of the navigation of some of the key features using a screen reader.

Liz Heaney

As you know, that's not the only disability. It does screen for a fair amount. So we do our testing for we have some people with disabilities definitely doing testing, but many times they cannot see people with screen reader users who are screen reader users cannot see contrast issues, for example, or font size issues, for example. And maybe the cognitive overload that some other things could produce might be transparent to them. So we do have testing services that go through all a slew of different issues that we're looking for, and we put that early in the RFP. We ask if we will be allowed to have access to test their software during this process. So we pre-empt that by having that asked in the RFP

Mark Walker

And so then that's what you're saying. They're sort of relatively light touch testing at that point, rather than sending it off externally. They're just checking that things make sense with some of the common issues.

Liz Heaney

Yeah, so we might miss some, but the idea is that we at least will get a good sense and see if the ACR they provided was well tested.

Mark Walker

Do you get much pushback from your vendors? I mean, are they on your side at that point? You're Google, you're buying, presumably, a fair amount of licences, you're a big customer. I mean, are they saying, why have I got to do this? Or do they get it? Are they in on your side of the coin? Or are they just trying to get over another lump before the deal signed off?

Liz Heaney

We do get a certain amount of pushback. That's more a problem for the procurement team, fortunately, because our jobs not so aggregated, there's pushback on that there's pushback on that contract. So our code of conduct for vendors says that they have to be WCAG 2.1 AA compliant. So that's on our code of conduct, we also have some contracts that they try to red line and they go, well, we're not 2.1 AA yet. And I'm like, okay, but then let's put it in the SOW, which is our statement of work, that you have to be compliant by the time we launch. It okay not to have it now, but you'll have to be at the time you launch. But they try to red line, like scratch out the accessibility sections of the contract. And I tell them, well, that's in our code of conduct, so you can't really delete it from the contract and make it go away. So that becomes more of a discussion of when they can become compliant and we do work. So, like I said, the procurement person and the person interested in buying the new product, they work with a vendor to see when they can make it.

In the case that they can't get compliant before launch. We do have, like I mentioned, the smoke testing. We create a hot list, we call it of bugs. So the list of bugs for that vendor and they have to file an exception report. The exception report gets signed by all sorts of people and I can get that into that later. But they say when they'll fix each of the bugs that were found now, I go with that list. And we have a tech stop accessibility so specialised, just for people with disabilities. And we'll share this list with them and ask them to keep adding to that list as people report issues. We also share it with the Accommodations team so that they're prepared and as part of the exception report, they have to identify a workaround. So this will help our Tech Stop team to show what the workaround is for people with disabilities. So once we have all that in place, then that product launches and when it's time to renew the contract, the person that specialises in renewal bear with me, because in Google it's easier when it's just one person sometimes. And so I've already worked with a person that does renewals.

I'm like, I'll add to your he has a Google Sheets document with all the different hot lists. So whenever this one comes for renewal, look at it, see how they've performed against their plan and see how many new issues were introduced. Because sometime with software as a service, they'll do an upgrade and they'll break things that were fine and fix things that were broken. That's why when you get an Accessibility Conformance report, it's important that it's for the version that you are implementing. Sometimes they'll be like, oh, this is for the previous version. And you're like, well.

Mark Walker

You’ve got some key allies there. I guess in your description there. You've got the procurement people, you've got whoever created the code of conduct, you've got the renewals processes. They're the sort of significant building blocks that you're connecting into from what you're saying. And are you stepping into a situation where Google has already made all those decisions? Or are you sort of continuing to push accessibility back onto the table and reminding people of these responsibilities? And I guess sometimes it will be one and sometimes it will be others.

Liz Heaney

It's interesting. Yes, there's different allies. The code of conduct was done by legal. I had to update for WCAG 2.1 AA. I can't tell you how much effort that was or how, like, it seemingly seems. Just changed the word and it had to get translated and get all over the place. So you need an ally in legal for contracts. And they're like, well, we have too many. I mean, you can get pushback from the different teams on that. They're like, well, now we have it in the code of conduct. But it's a win every time because it's a muscle you need to learn to work, right? I got lucky that I got a good partnership and I found a founding year from my procurement office getting in with your head of procurement to me is the key point because they are the gatekeeper of anything that comes in. Whichever way it might come in, it'll go through procurement. So it's a one touch point that you can have where you're in, you're in. They also own the RFP process. They own all of the processes themselves, right? So getting them in is critical if you don't get as lucky and you find someone who's like, yeah, whatever.

There are a few things I've been thinking about what you could do if you're not so lucky. I think sometimes people don't see people struggle with a product. So if they bought a third party product for mostly they buy third party products for the areas of finance or human resources. All the human resource operations which finance okay, but all the human resources ones are used by most of the companies, so you're bound to hit someone with disabilities. So having them watch someone with a screen reader trying to do their performance review or self assessment is just, like, I think could be an awakening for them to see the importance. With Cindy Ingwen, who is our head of procurement. I don't know why I said head three times, but she and I will lay down the process of procurement and start seeing where else we could put a control to make it work. I think, like I said, if you put it very much at the end as a launch check, by then you probably have a signed contract. Well, for sure you have a signed contract and you lost all your power of negotiating with a vendor and you've run through your timeline of allowing them [COUGHS] sorry, I had COVID, sorry.

Mark Walker

No worries.

Liz Heaney

So you probably by then run through your timeline that would allow them to fix any issues and they already have, let's say, the Google logo as one of their clients. So it gets a lot trickier to enforce that's where you can go for renewal, like at the time that the licence comes up for renewal for making changes in the amendment of the contract. But again, it's always easier if you have it early on, like in the RFP, when people are looking at different vendors more openly and go like, oh, this one's not accessible, but that one is. If all things are similar, then why not?

Mark Walker

I'm interested in a couple of things. Firstly, do you see the vendors realising the competitive advantage? And just in the time that you've been working on this, are more people realising they need to get this right? Is it becoming a competitive advantage for somebody to get that right?

Liz Heaney

I've not seen it, but in all fairness, I've not been exposed to that side. I just get them once they've been narrowed down. I think if more companies were to do this, then it will become something that the sales team says, hey, fix this bug, because we're losing against other companies that are more accessible. I don't know what they do with a message when they hear they didn't win the bid. Maybe because of accessibility issues. I've not been exposed to that. But I do think it's important that the more and more people do this, the more it'll happen. I've led a pretty long career implementing software successfully too, without ever giving it a thought, giving accessibility a thought. And not because I didn't care. It just didn't even occur to me. And so if I'm a project manager and I look at RFPs and I'm like, oh, accessibility okay, yeah, no, it has to be accessible, but if you've never thought of it, you might skip it altogether, like I've done for so many years. And so I think that just having that there is important for more than just the procurement person. It's just creating a habit of thinking that way.

Mark Walker

Yeah. And then the other person you've mentioned who I think is really interesting is the procurement specialist, the person your ally. How long is the list of priorities that she's facing of which accessibility is just one? I'm imagining that they could be 100% committed to accessibility, but they still have 101 other items that they need to consider within their processes. Security being the one you mentioned.

Liz Heaney

Yeah. And security and privacy, fortunately, take a while, but they have goals to get the procurement process to be faster and smoother. And I'm adding a hurdle. So in a way, it's for them to buy adding this hurdle with me. That's why it's tricky. I don't know if that answers your question.

Mark Walker

No, it does. I think it's helpful to see it from their point of view, isn't it? So that we understand. Absolutely. And why this is easy to drop or easy to overlook or easy to skimp on. We may have the intention, but the reality is it will slow it down, as you say, and their targets will be about the speed of implementation, not specifically accessibility. That's an interesting observation.

Liz Heaney

It's important, too, because that's how they get measured. Right? So if you're adding something that slows them down, they're less likely to buy into it. But I did get lucky. And we do have a team that we also contract out in case we need more capacity to make sure that we do our testing before privacy and security, like in a shorter time frame, if you will, so that we don't become a burden to her process. So that's kind of –

Mark Walker

That's a nice tip, actually. I quite like that one. I think that if anybody's thinking about where they might do it, then within the decision making process is to look for that gap where you're the one that got it done. Not first, necessarily, but early. You want to know sooner rather than later, don't you? You want an early heads up that this isn't going to pass the test is better than waiting until the others have done theirs and then telling them they've got to go and do it on another product instead, because your testing is third. I think that's a really interesting route into the conversation with the procurement person as well, because that speeds their processes up and as you say, that's their key metrics.

Liz Heaney

But we do have a culture of accessibility. So I will say that it's not that I had to justify this for Cindy. She saw the importance of it right away, which was really nice, but I had that in my mind.

Mark Walker

No, well, I'm a great believer in terms of advocacy for accessibility. We talk about preaching to the choir, to the people who are already sort of in the gang and the people outside, in the other choirs, the procurement choir, what does their world look like? What are their challenges, what are their problems? The more you understand that the easier it is to cross the line and work together. So that's a really helpful observation, I think.

Liz Heaney

Absolutely. So here it is. Like, if you can't get your procurement office to buy into this, I think your second best would be your programme Management Office, or PMO project Management office. However product management office. Normally, when you are going to buy product, well, there's that build versus buy decision, but that's already a project. And I find that they are going to be involved in most of the RFP process and the whole shebang. So if you can get them to say, like, hey, if you ever are in a position where the answer is buy versus build, here are some questions I'd like to make sure that we ask. And as long as it's in the PMO and they know that this is happening, then they can plan for it as well. I do think that some of the pushback you might get in general, like when you're doing accessibility, like I did kind of hint to it is that you have pressure to launch the product, right? So that's where the exception report maybe comes in. So having the PMO ahead, knowing that these are questions that can be asked, will create that knowledge. Because I think people don't just most people, it's not that they don't care about accessibility.

Most people don't think about it. And so just getting them to think about it becomes an important tool to make products more accessible. At least you'll get the ones that think about that care about it, which is a vast majority, I would say. You'd grow that population by getting knowledge out there of like, did you think of asking this if you're going to be buying versus building? And if they know that you're the person to ask, they'll go, hey, I'm buying something. Now, I don't remember you mentioned something about accessibility. What are the things I should ask? Right, so I have a short checklist of things to ask for them when the time comes.

Mark Walker

That's a good and the short checklist is that at the level of the smoke test, is it sort of just a very sort of I don't mean literally in terms of the actual activity, but it's general check in make sure they've said this. Make sure they've said this type thing?

Liz Heaney

Ask if they're WCAG 2.1 AA or when you get to Europe, like their regulation right. Would be more appropriate for you. See what type of discipline they have in testing. Like, do they have an ACR filled out? Who filled it out? Do they have a process by which someone with disabilities can escalate an issue? Can they give you access for people with disabilities to test the software ahead of purchase? So those are the questions. Those basic questions will give you a temperature cheque on whether the vendor is compliant. And if they say, I don't know if I'm WCAG 2.1, I think there's a lot of intentionality on being accessible. So people think, Well, I don't know. So we probably are. And that's probably the opposite because there is so much intentionality in making it accessible and usable, right? Like having to tab 40 times to get to where you want to go. It's not usable. It might be accessible, but not usable. So you do really have to design with accessibility in mind, and it makes a big difference when you do.

Mark Walker

So that's just led me on to one final area, really, is this difference between accessibility and usability. I'm thinking about the ways in which you interact with others when they're making their decision. So, like you said about, yes, it's technically accessible, but you've got to tab 40 times to get to this. We have in house systems that probably are accessible, but I don't like using them because they don't feel very usable. That's a funny line, isn't it? Once you've got over the line between accessible technically correct. How do you then make decisions when you need to about usability and in particularly involving real users? Is that the stuff when you've already bought it and you keep a log at that point, you're just sort of reporting on it? Do you do anything before that?

Liz Heaney

Yeah, I don't know that users report annoying and hard to use as much as an issue, but we do heuristic evaluations. That's what we call them. I don't know why. Or agua studies. They're usability studies. So we will have people from our disability alliance that will volunteer to help have them go through the process and see the issues they face. Some of the usability ones, god, we have a list, but I will give you a few of them. But there's like multiple tabs to get to where you want to go to the options not being clear, the overload of options for certain disabilities. So just giving them way too many options, or not being very consistent on what an option means. There are a few more of usability issues. But yeah, the biggest one that I think of is like the multiple tabs, the findability, right. When you see that many people can't find how to do a simple thing, that's also one of those. But yeah, we do usability studies with people from different disability groups.

Mark Walker

Cool. So a final question for me, I guess, is what lies ahead? It all sounds great in Google. You don't need to do much more. It's all working perfectly from what you've just said. Where are the Google challenges in terms of this issue, do you think? In terms of the next sort of big steps for it? Clearly you're taking lots and lots of very positive steps. Where do you see the next sort of phase of development being?

Liz Heaney

Well, we're actually going to set up a brainstorming session and redraw our purchasing process and see where we can tweak again and have our procurement person there, the people from the Tools governance team there, like everybody that's involved in it coming up with ideas on how to make it better. And I think that that will help people gain ownership of their idea and help implement it. I kind of had done this myself already, but I want them to suggest it so they feel more ownership. I think there's no end of training people in Google on accessibility. I think the more people that know about this, the better you'll be all around. But the biggest pressure still remains the need to launch. I want to launch now. And it has accessibility issues. I think people like to implement things and so it's always that challenge of, hey, I know you want to launch, but this is going to be a problem when you do. So getting them to think about this earlier in the process is where it comes in. So we do design reviews now. We're trying to get people to have their mocks, their initial mocks come to our team for design reviews.

So people go like, yeah, see, this is not going to work for people with low vision or for people with different types of disabilities. So we have a guide on how to do good design so that by that time it gets to launch, it's already been thought through all the way and we don't have to deal with, you can't launch like this, they'll already have that baked in. So I think that that's we're just calling it shift left. Like just trying to get always further ahead on the process and ensuring that our UX and engineering teams are trained on accessible design and engineering.

Mark Walker

And I guess the same thing goes to the procurement teams as well in the sense that that sort of is one of a number of things they need to know about and why it's mentioned in the contractual side of things. So the greater awareness they have, the sooner they spot an issue which is going to slow the process down from their side.

Liz Heaney

Absolutely. Just when they see it, right? Like, they'll see the RFP come back and so they'll see having those questions in there is already a way to reach their team. But Cindy will make sure she's our Global Procurement Office head and she'll make sure that her team is aware of it. But, yeah, I think definitely they don't need to be super savvy on procurement, on accessibility, in procurement, they just need to know it's important in a way. Right. So I feel like whenever you buy, you're still implementing, so it's important for the engineering teams as well to be aware of it, so that they may could buy an accessible software and making it accessible really quick. So it's important that you have the teams that are implementing aware of it, too.

Mark Walker

That's fantastic. Thank you so much. I think that from the point of view of people listening in, google is obviously a complicated machine in the sense of all the different decisions that are being linked together. I particularly picked up on your point about some people's sort of key indicator, is how quickly we're going to get the decision made. For lots of reasons, I want to get to launch quickly. It's a key indicator for me, therefore, for the procurement team to get through that process quickly. So how can we simplify that from the accessibility point of view? Earlier is better for that reason, I'm sure, as you're saying, from their point of view, you're saying, look, my advice to you, you want to get it done quickly, do it the beginning, not the end, because then that's broadly why they're going to buy into it, isn't it?

Liz Heaney

Yeah. Well, a couple of things, right. We are lucky that accessibility is in our mission statement, so we are about making the world's information accessible and it means it that way. So we have some good support at the top, which I think is important, but I think we're all rich at the beginning of a project in time, right? Like, everybody feels like, okay, we're in requirements, whatever. September feels so far away, we're good. And so if you're considering it now, it doesn't feel as onerous as when you have like, I have one week left and I need to launch now. And now you come and put your foot out on this accessibility thing. That's a terrible experience for everybody involved and it doesn't serve your people with disabilities at all. So having it be at the beginning is where you'll get the easiest buy in and the least conflict. Right. But it's also important to have that culture top down, so you don't get People sorry -?

Mark Walker

That's a good combination. I think that's the goal, I guess, for anybody looking in and thinking about how their organisation is going to improve that you're going to return to that across the two sort of areas of top down and then inside the processes. That's going to be that common theme, isn't it?

Liz Heaney

Yeah. It's not impossible to do it without top down if you find a good ally within the different groups, but it definitely makes it easier when you have that in your favour. And it's hard to say, like, no, I'm not for accessibility. Right? You probably won't get that from the top either.

Mark Walker

No. Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for joining us, Liz. It's been really interesting. And I think I know a bit about Google because of other people we work with, but the processes you're describing there and bringing to life the decision making inside the organisation are fascinating. And I'm sure people listening in are going to learn a lot from top tips and some of the points at which perhaps when to prod and when to step back, that sort of thing. It's really fascinating.

Liz Heaney

I hope so. I'm sorry I'm not there. Live with you guys today, but happy to answer any questions after the meeting, if that's needed. I hope you have a great panel and I'm glad to be here. I think Google is a very big company, so it does add simplicity and complexity as well. Right. Like having to split between the different people that you have in a process where in other companies, it's always just one person. So I have to get buy in from More to get the same, but it's all good. I think it's a noble deed.

Mark Walker

Well, that passion runs through everything you're talking about. Really wonderful to hear it coming through in the way that you're doing your work. So thank you.