Designing Courses with Purpose:
How Associations Can Build More Inclusive Learning Experiences for Their Members

Your association members relying on your educational content to grow in their professions may include individuals with hearing loss, low vision, or those simply working from devices with bandwidth limitations. The bottom line: not all barriers are visible, but the impact of ignoring them leads to missed opportunities, lower engagement, and reduced member satisfaction.

If you're using Elevate, Cadmium's award-winning learning management system, you've already got a strong foundation. However, accessibility isn't just a platform feature; it's about how you design, deliver, and maintain content with inclusion for all members in mind.

Accessible Design Starts with Consistency

Disorganized course layouts and erratic user interfaces are more than just annoying. They are exclusionary in nature. Members that use screen readers or navigation tools need a predictable learning management system (LMS) structure that follows a logical flow.

What to implement:

· Use a consistent layout across all of your courses. Every page should follow a logical flow from top to bottom.

· Apply clear headings using semantic HTML (such as H1 for titles, H2 for section headers, and BODY for core page content). This helps screen readers interpret page hierarchy for enhanced clarity.

· Keep your LMS' navigation simple and in the same location throughout your association's LMS.

· Label all call-to-action button clearly, with descriptive and direct text such as "Start Course", "Submit Quiz", "Read Full Article."

· Remove unnecessary distractions such as pop-ups, excessive animations, and anything else that could confuse learners using assistive technologies.

Pro Tip: Create standardized course templates and have your team test navigation using only keyboard and tab controls.

Videos Should Speak to Everyone

Video is an essential part of the learning experience, especially in professional development and virtual learning. Video that lacks captions or transcripts excludes a significant portion of your membership base. Members who are deaf or hard of hearing, people in noisy environments, even those who prefer reading over listening, all rely on accurate text-based alternatives.

What to implement:

· Add accurate, human-reviewed captions to every livestream or recorded video to ensure readability.

· Offer downloadable transcripts in multiple formats (PDF or plain text) so members can easily reference video content if they are offline.

· Use clear speaker labels, subject actions, and timestamps so members can easily understand the context of the video.

· Leverage a video player that provides caption settings so members can control text size, background, and video speed.

· Avoid relying solely on visuals or audio methods to deliver critical information. Always provide an alternative method of access.

Pro Tip: Build captioning into your course production workflow and assign a designated review before publishing. This ensures quality and accessibility.

Don't Let Design Be a Barrier

Color contrast, font readability, and text size aren't just branding decisions; they directly determine whether your content is digestible for your members. For learners with visual impairments, dyslexia, or cognitive processing issues, poor visual design turns your platform into a minefield of frustration.

What to implement:

· Choose high contrast color combinations for text, background, and imagery. For example, black text on a white background or yellow text on a navy background.

· Use fonts that are easy to read such as Open Sans, Roboto, or Lato. Stick with sizes between 14 and 18 for body text.

· Avoid using color alone to convey meaning (for example, red for wrong and green for correct). Use text labels, icons, or shapes as supporting indicators.

· Test your design under simulated color blindness using free tools such as WebAIM Contract Checker.

- Ensure responsive design across devices and make sure your LMS content adjusts cleanly for tablets, phones, and desktop equally.

Pro Tip: Establish a style guide with accessible font sizes, contrast requirements, compliant images, and other requirements. Use it across all content creation teams for consistency.

Make Images and Links Speak for Themselves

Every piece of visual content in your course materials should serve a purpose, which must be communicated clearly to members who cannot see it. For members relying on screen readers, unlabeled images or vague hyperlinks can lead to dead ends. Alt text and descriptive link labels ensure that key context is not lost.

What to implement:

- Add alt text to every instructional image, diagram, or chart. Describe what it shows and why it matters.

- Avoid writing "click here" on your hyperlinks or buttons. Instead, use descriptive link text like "Download the Member Handbook" or "View the Course Catalog."

- Avoid putting essential content inside images without offering an equally descriptive text alternative.

- For decorative graphics, mark them as such so screen readers can easily skip them.

- Make sure your LMS' buttons and icons also include screen reader labels so listeners know how information is being shared.

Pro Tip: Create an internal checklist for alt text and link clarity during QA and content reviews.

Accessibility in Interaction and Timing

Not everyone uses a mouse when navigating learning material, and not everyone processes information at the same speed. Courses that assume a one-size-fits-all approach to interaction end up loking members out. Your system should allow learners to control pacing, use alternative input methods, and navigate content without barriers.

What to implement:

- Ensure every action within your LMS can be completed using a keyboard. This includes quizzes, navigation, form submissions, and videos.

- Empower your members to pause, stop, or control multimedia content according to their needs. Do not autoplay videos or pop-ups.

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- Offer extended time limits or untimed options for quizzes and assessments for learners who request or need them.

- Design tab order and keyboard shortcuts to match visual layout, so all learners can get a sense of your LMS' layout.

- Test your courses with screen reader simulators and see how they can be navigated with or without a mouse.

Pro Tip: Use accessibility testing tools such as WAVE or Axe to evaluate your course for keyboard focus indicators, tab logic, and other time-based interactions.

Accessibility is an Ongoing Commitment, Not a Checkbox

True accessibility is a continuous process that should be integrated into every stage of your association's development life cycle. Elevate provides the tools and framework to support accessible courses, but it's up to you to use them intentionally.

You can start by following the WCAG 2.0 Checklist. You can use the A11y Project and W3C for quick references linked below, but most importantly, make accessibility a required part of your course design process.

- The A11y Project Checklist

- WCAG 2.0 Quick Reference

- Accessibility Tools at a11y.me

Want to explore the solution associations are using to create accessible courses? Learn more about Elevate here.