



**IAAP**

International Association  
of Accessibility Professionals

# **UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACHES TO ACCESSIBILITY**

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# Introduction

This report is based on research conducted by the International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP), a division of G3ict. The report is provided as part of IAAP's mission to define, promote, and improve the accessibility profession globally through networking, education, and certification to enable the creation of accessible products, content, and services.

As public and private sector organizations around the world work toward the goals of accessibility (also referred to as "a11y" in this paper) and inclusion, they encounter similar challenges regardless of their industry, business model, or region. New technologies and evolving legal frameworks make accessibility a complex challenge, and there is no single process or approach that will work for every organization.

However, the IAAP believes there is value in using a shared set of resources and tools that have been proven to facilitate effective accessibility programs and accessibility practices. Therefore, the IAAP conducted a survey of organizations and individuals to learn what resources and tools they are using to manage and grow their own accessibility programs and outcomes. This report summarizes the findings from that survey.

## Study Highlights

The survey reveals the top three organizational motivators to invest in accessibility are:

- a. compliance with applicable laws and regulations;
- b. inclusion of all audiences; and
- c. accessibility as an inherent part of the organization's purpose.

**More than 66% of organizations cite legal compliance and risk management as a top motivator to invest in accessibility, but less than 25% have an established compliance process or use internal accessibility scorecards to measure and track their progress.**

The survey also shows there is a correlation between **increased maturity of accessibility programs** and the organization's level of **investment in specific leadership and management components**.

The survey identifies the top ten investments for organizations serious about accessibility:

- Dedicated Funding & Accessibility Resources
- Accessibility Criteria in Contracts and POs
- Tools with Built-in Accessibility Checking
- Accessibility Design and Authoring Practices
- Internal Accessibility Scorecard
- Engagement with the Disability Community
- Written Organization-wide Policy / Commitment
- Central Accessibility Team with Senior Leader
- Accessibility Compliance Process
- Accessibility Engineering and Testing Practices

The majority of survey respondents are interested in additional guidance and resources related to:

- A. Strategies for consistently authoring accessible content and media;
- B. Design and engineering practices to create inclusive products and services; and
- C. Proven model(s) to establish and run an organization-wide accessibility program.

## Methodology

### Survey Goals and Objectives

The general goal of the survey was to understand how organizations are implementing their internal accessibility programs, which operational elements are in place, and which resources and tools they utilize to perform accessibility work. In addition, the survey sought to identify challenges that are hindering the pursuit of accessibility within organizations and for individual accessibility practitioners.

### Participants

Of the 205 individuals who completed the survey:

- 161 respondents represent organizations located in the United States.
- 44 respondents represent organizations located in other countries.

### Data Collected

The survey was not limited to IAAP members. 25% of respondents are members through their organization's IAAP membership, 33% joined IAAP as an individual, and 42% are not members.

Data was collected using a Formstack online survey and collected two forms of data:

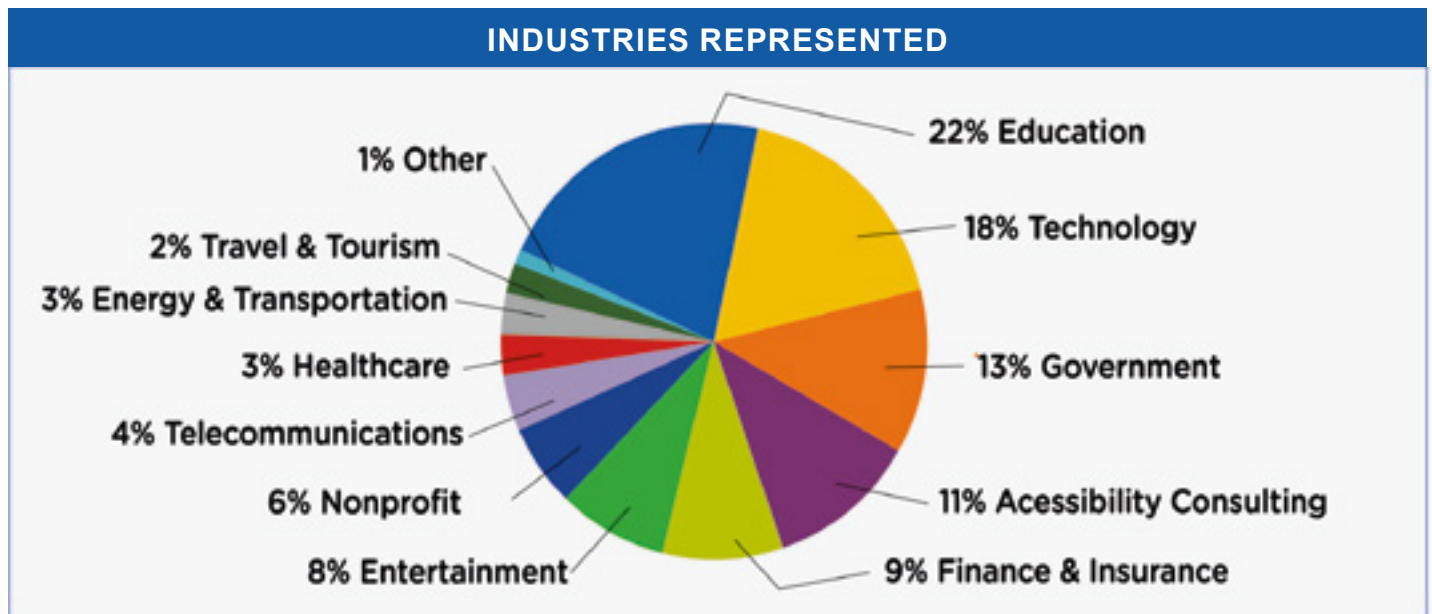
- Qualitative data involving participant open survey text comments; and
- Quantitative data from survey items that requested single-answer or multiple-answer responses.

### Key Research Questions

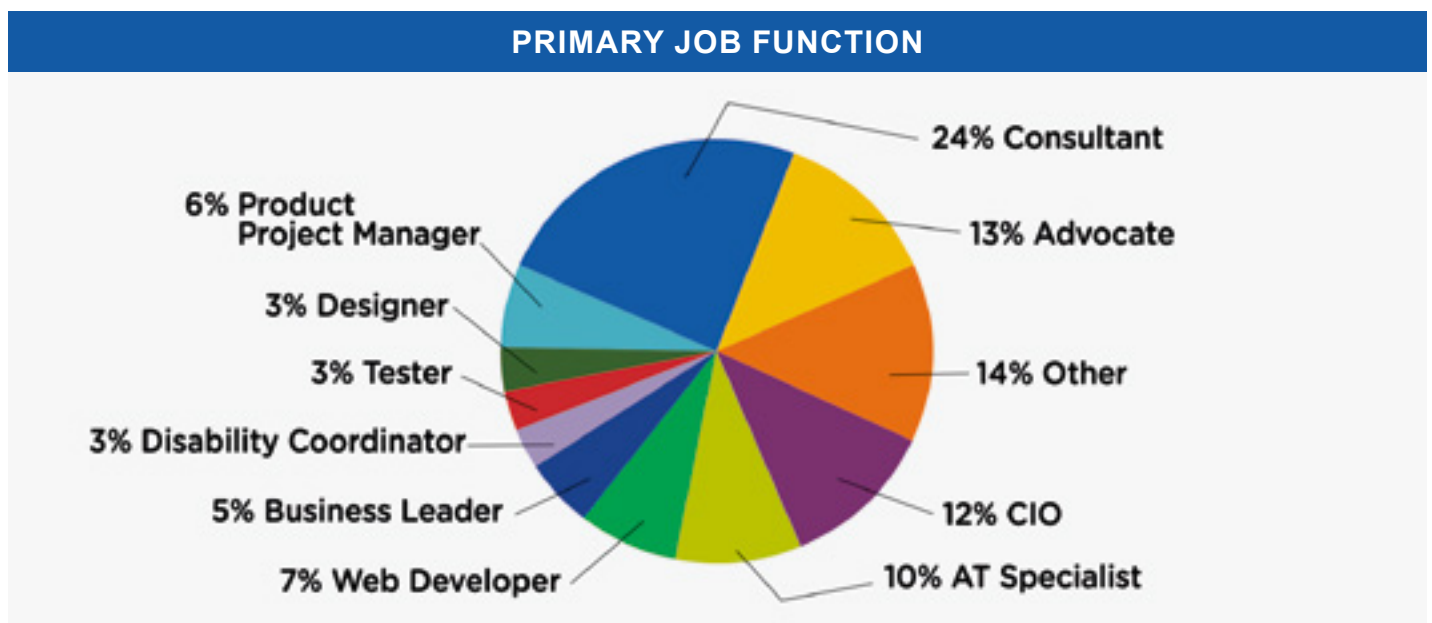
- Are there commonly adopted program elements across organizations or sectors?
- Is there a correlation between maturity of an organization's program and the number or type of leadership and management components it has implemented?
- What are the most common factors that motivate investment in accessibility?
- Is legal compliance the leading motivator for organizations to invest in accessibility?
- What tools or sources of information and guidance are most widely used today by accessibility practitioners?
- What resources can IAAP provide to help improve accessibility outcomes for organizations or individual accessibility practitioners?

## Scope of Survey

64% of survey responses came from organizations involved in Education, Technology, Government, and Accessibility Consulting. The other 36% represented Finance & Insurance, Entertainment, Nonprofit, Telecommunications, Healthcare, Energy & Transportation, Travel & Tourism, and Other.



Individual respondents to the survey hold a variety of job roles and span the depth of the organizational tree. The survey was focused on the creation, growth, and management of accessibility programs, so it attracted a diverse set of participants. 47% of responses came from individuals with an accessibility-specific role (e.g. AT Specialist, Consultant, or Advocate), 22% are involved in developing or testing accessible solutions, 12% are CIOs, and 5% identified as Business Leaders.



## Findings

There are four key areas of insight in the survey results:

1. What **motivates** organizations to invest in accessibility and inclusion initiatives;
2. What **program elements** are commonly found in accessibility programs (e.g. creating content, services, solutions);
3. What **sources of accessibility guidance** are most widely used today; and
4. What **new investments** would help organizations be more successful in their pursuit of accessibility and inclusion.

## Key Motivators

The survey asked for the **intended beneficiaries** of an organization's accessibility work.

Nearly two-thirds invest in accessibility for the benefit of both internal employees and external audiences; one-third invest for the benefit of their customers or some other external audience (e.g. a government's citizens); and only 6% invest solely for their own employees.

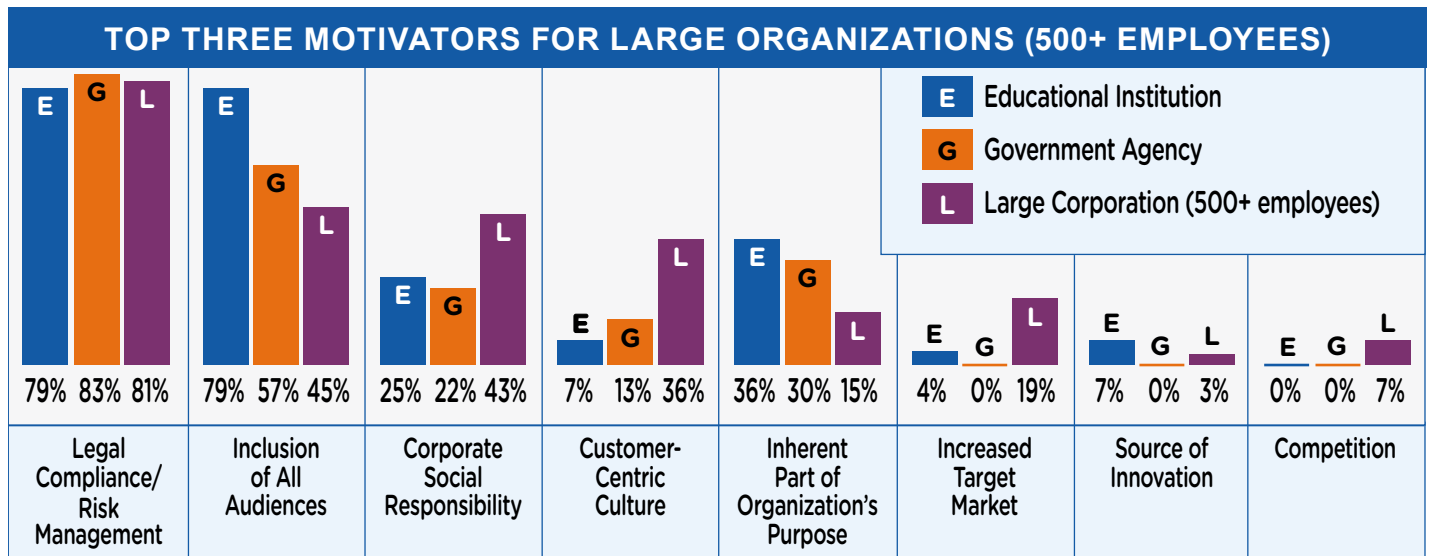
Legal and regulatory compliance is frequently assumed to be the primary reason to invest in accessible solutions so the IAAP asked respondents to identify their top three motivators for their organization's investment in accessibility.

Survey results confirm that legal compliance is the most compelling motivator in government and large corporations. Education is equally motivated by legal compliance and the inclusion of all audiences. And small organizations are primarily motivated by this same desire for the inclusion of all audiences.

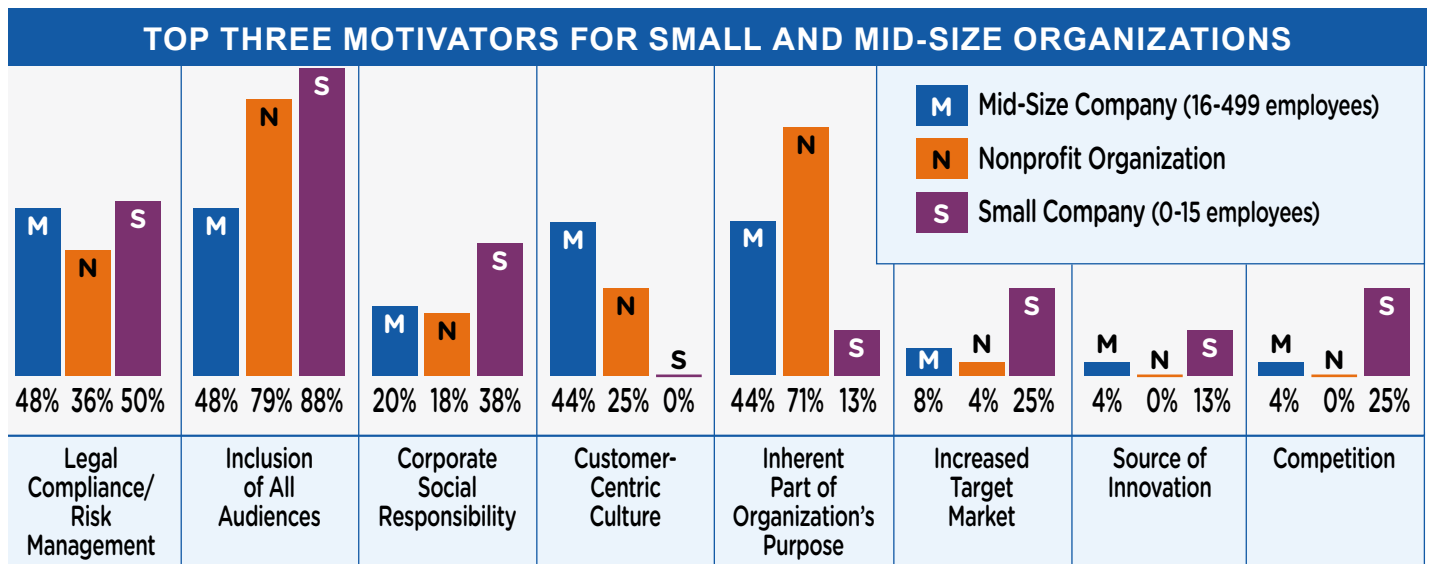


To understand how these motivators change based on the type of organization, we examined large (500+ employees) and small organizations (non-profit and for-profit with less than 500 employees).

As shown in the following chart, the differing missions of corporations, governments and educational institutions influence their focus on inclusion and customer-centric culture. Education and government are expected to serve the needs of all their students and citizens, whereas corporations have more latitude to choose who to serve. This expectation may change with the rising social pressure to consider the broader implications for privacy, the environment, and inclusion of people of all ages and abilities.



In the case of smaller organizations, there is a clear difference in motivation. They tend to pursue inclusive outcomes as a core part of their organizational mission and culture (67% vs. 55% in large orgs) and significantly less drive from legal compliance (43% vs. 81% in large orgs). Not surprisingly, of all survey responses, non-profit organizations report high motivation based on inclusion of all audiences (79%) and inherent part of the org's purpose (71%).





## Secondary Benefits of Accessibility

Are secondary benefits of accessibility such as increased target market, competitive advantage, and product innovation helping to drive interest and motivate investment in accessibility?

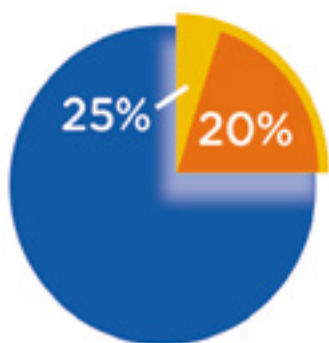
Most modern products and services incorporate one or more technologies that were originally created as an accessibility solution. This includes speech recognition, synthetic speech, video captions, Swype™-style keyboard interaction, and others that were refined based on feedback from the disability community before becoming mainstream solutions.

As a result, there is a common belief within the accessibility field that companies are likely to realize secondary benefits of their investments in accessibility. These benefits can include:

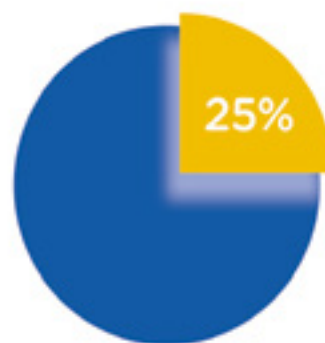
- increased target market due to improved usability of the product/service;
- competitive advantage based on increased demand and customer satisfaction; and
- innovation driven by more demanding interaction requirements of people with disabilities.

To test this belief, the survey asked if any of these secondary benefits are among the organization's top three motivators to invest in accessibility. The results indicate these are not primary motivators for most organizations. The highest scores were among large organizations and small businesses: 20% of corporations and 25% of small businesses are motivated by the potential to increase their addressable market. 25% of small organizations use accessibility as a competitive advantage and 13% look to it as a source of innovation.

**20% of corporations and 25% of small businesses use accessibility to increase their addressable market.**



**25% of small businesses are interested in using accessibility as a competitive differentiator.**



## Components of Successful Accessibility Programs

There is no one-size-fits-all accessibility program that will produce optimal results across all organizations, industries, and types of solutions. However, there is a longstanding hypothesis that support from executive leaders and the presence of certain management controls will elevate the maturity of a program and improve accessibility outcomes.

For example, it is widely believed that organizations tend to be more successful if they have an executive sponsor who consistently champions accessibility and ensures the necessary investments in people, processes, technology, and tools.

This survey sought to identify the set of leadership and management components widely used today and determine if there is an observable correlation between those investments and the maturity of an organization's accessibility program.

Multiple methodologies are available to assess an organization's accessibility maturity. Rather than capturing usage data for each model, we defined a genericized maturity model that uses the following scale:

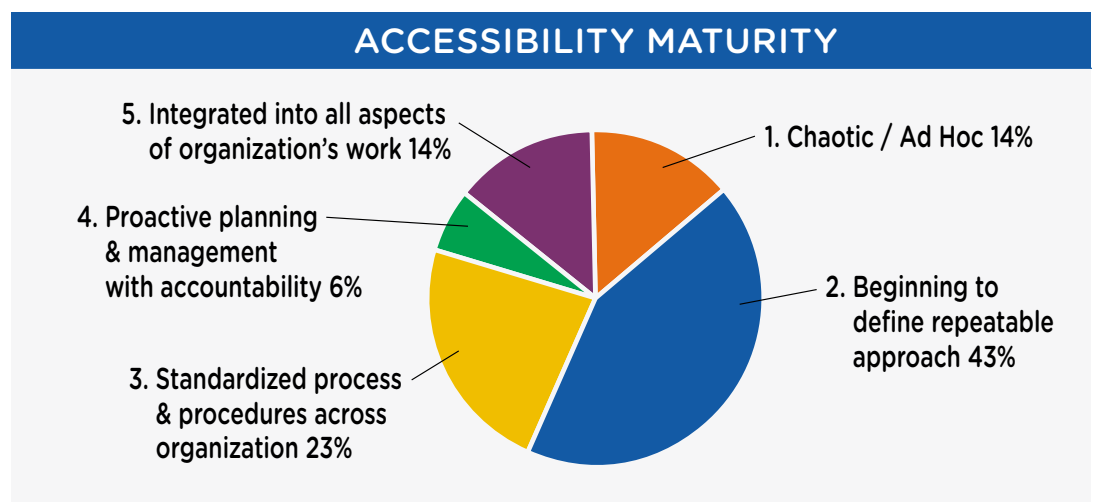
1. Chaotic or Ad Hoc
2. Beginning to define a repeatable approach
3. Standardized processes and procedures adopted across the organization
4. Proactive planning and management of investments with accountability for results
5. Integrated into all aspects of the organization's work to achieve optimal results

Historically, programs in stage 1 maturity (Chaotic or Ad Hoc) are likely to have little engagement from executive leadership and limited controls to organize and manage their accessibility work. At stage 5 (Full Integration), we expect programs to be fully supported by executive leadership and have processes in place to optimize all phases of content, product, and service offerings (i.e. planning, design, implementation, evaluation, delivery, and support).

We asked each respondent to rate their accessibility program using this five-point scale.

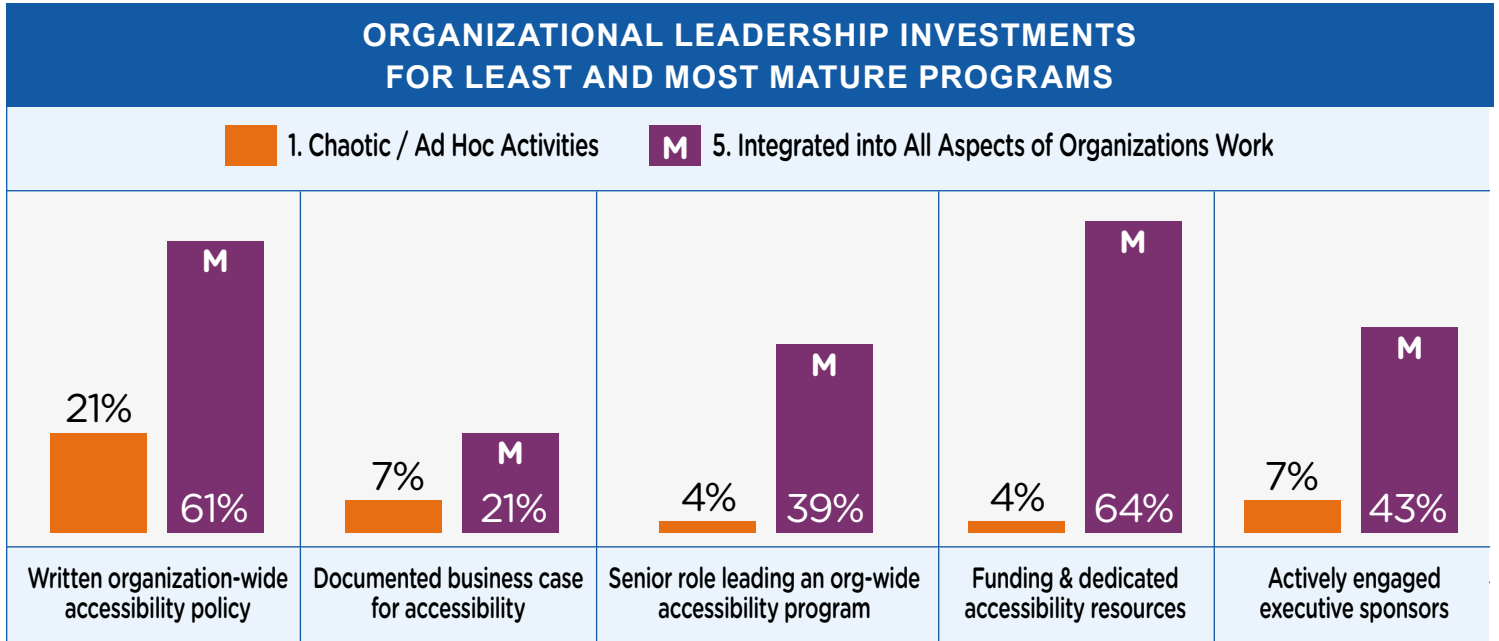
Of the 205 organizational responses to this question, 57% described their programs as either **ad hoc** or **beginning to define a repeatable approach**. They do not have standardized accessibility processes or procedures, they are not proactively planning for accessibility, and they are not holding teams accountable.

Only 6% self-rated as being at stage four – having reached the point of planning and investing proactively – while 14% state accessibility is fully integrated into their organization's work.



## Leadership Investments

For an organization to achieve and sustain accessible results, the leadership team must support and promote its accessibility program. Therefore, the survey explored which leadership investments are most common. It also sought to determine whether there is a correlation between investments in leadership and the maturity of an organization's accessibility program. (For the purposes of this report, maturity is considered an indicator of program effectiveness, i.e. mature programs tend to produce more accessible results more consistently over time.)



If we look across all organizations surveyed, regardless of the maturity of their accessibility program, we find that 55% have a written organization-wide accessibility policy, 32% have dedicated funding and accessibility resources, 31% have at least one executive sponsor, and 12% have no support at all from their leadership team. However, when we examine leadership investments according to the level of program maturity, the results are quite different.

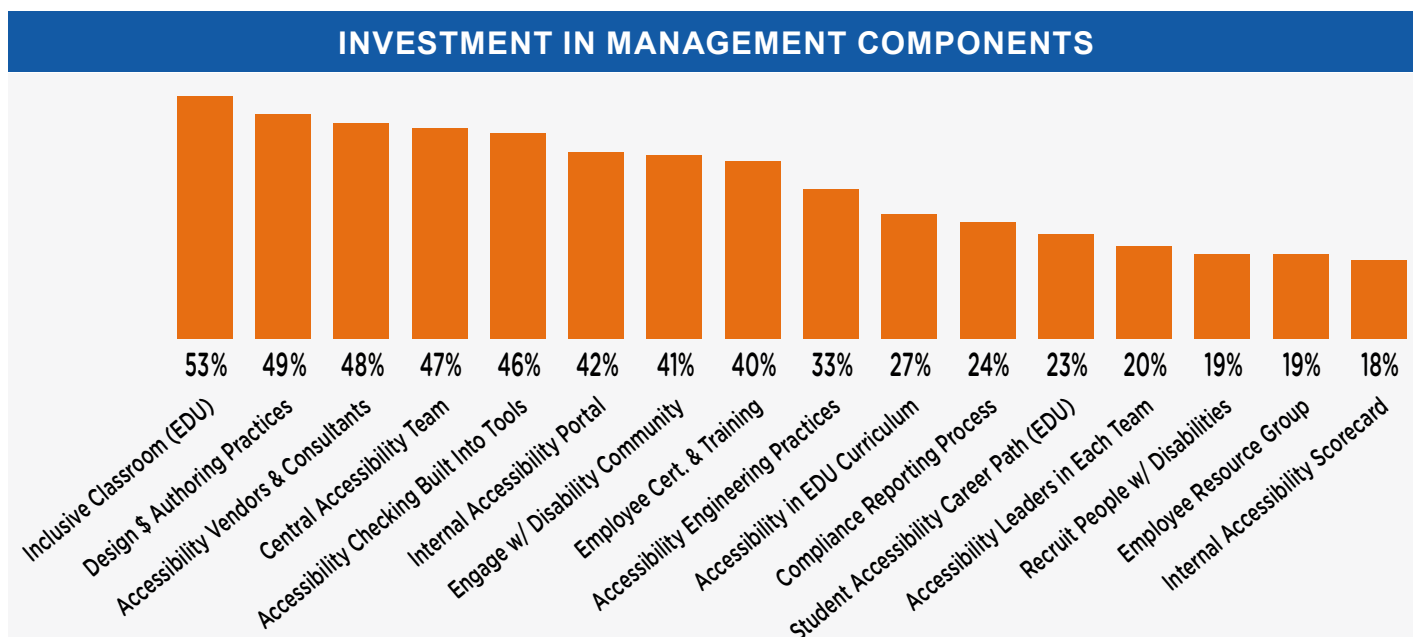
The survey shows that investments in organizations with the least mature (ad hoc) programs are significantly lower than average. Only 21% have a written accessibility policy which is key for defining and communicating expectations across the organization. The other four leadership investments were found in fewer than 8% of these organizations.

Among organizations with the most mature (fully integrated) programs we see higher levels of investment in all five areas. 61% of these organizations have a written accessibility policy and 64% have allocated dedicated funding and accessibility resources. Less than half invested in other areas: 43% have at least one executive sponsor and 39% have a senior role leading their organization-wide program.

Overall, a documented business case for accessibility is the least common leadership investment. It is found in only 14% of organizations, regardless of program maturity, and in only 21% of organizations with mature programs. This result is a bit surprising because there has been considerable effort over the past 15 years from the community of accessibility experts to quantify and define the business case for accessibility. This survey result may indicate those efforts have not produced a lasting impact.

## Management Components

Management components determine the day-to-day mechanics and operational model used to create and deliver accessible results. The survey asked which of these components are currently present in their organization's program.



Among Educational Institutions, 53% invest in **materials for an inclusive classroom**.

Across the full range of organizations, the five most common management controls are:

1. **design and authoring practices (49%);**
2. **accessibility vendors and consultants (48%);**
3. **central accessibility team (47%);**
4. **tools with built-in accessibility checking (46%); and**
5. **internal accessibility portal (42%).**

Only 24% of these organizations have an established **Compliance Reporting Process**, and only 18% have an **Internal Accessibility Scorecard**. These low levels of investment are surprising because they do not support respondents' claims that legal compliance and risk management are key motivators for 68% of the organizations. Compliance processes and internal scorecards are considered compulsory for any serious accessibility program.

To better understand these results, we examined how the investments change based on the type of organization. This revealed that large corporations are more likely to invest in management components than other types of organizations. Their top three investments are a Central Accessibility Team (66%), an Internal Accessibility Portal (54%), and Design & Authoring Practices (54%).

Government organizations lead in the use of A11y Criteria in Contracts & POs (54%), which is likely due to accessibility procurement standards like Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act and the EN 301 549 in the EU.

We are encouraged to see that 40% of organizations are now investing in employee training and certification. Furthermore, there is relatively consistent interest across all four types of organizations: 43% of large corporations, 42% of small organizations, 37% of educational institutions, and 31% of government agencies. This indicates our work at the IAAP is aligned with the growing demand for accessibility expertise.

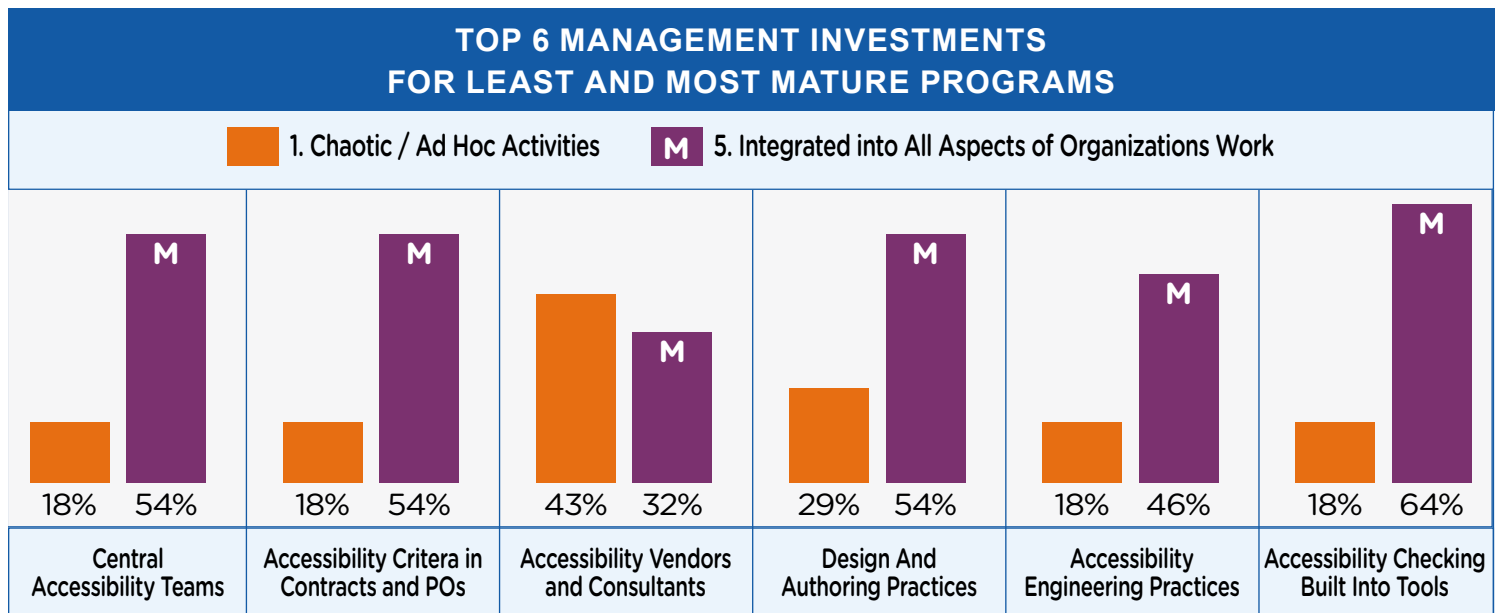
The **pursuit of accessibility as a career path** and **hiring of people with disabilities** are some of the lowest areas of investment. Among large corporations and government agencies, 19% recruit people with disabilities, and only 9% focus on accessibility as a career path. Nonprofits and small to mid-sized companies are doing better: 24% invest in accessibility as a career path and 28% have programs to recruit and hire people with disabilities.

Recall that one of our goals is to understand if there is any correlation between investments in management components and the maturity of an organization’s accessibility program.

The chart below shows a clear trend of increased investment in key management controls for more mature accessibility programs. Among fully integrated, mature programs:

- 64% use tools with built-in accessibility checking;
- 57% adopted design and authoring best practices;
- 54% have a central accessibility team;
- 54% incorporated accessibility criteria in contracts and POs; and
- 46% adopted accessibility engineering practices.

The use of accessibility criteria in contracts and POs jumps from 33% to 54% when organizations begin to establish standardized processes and procedures (maturity level 4). This level of investment is maintained in mature organizations because these criteria improve communication with partners and suppliers. It ensures they are made aware of accessibility requirements at the beginning of a project and know those criteria must be satisfied before delivery and payment.



The survey reveals an inverse relationship between program maturity and reliance on external accessibility consultants or vendors. The level of investment rises from 43% to 53% during the first four stages of maturity, but it drops to 32% in organizations with fully integrated (mature) programs. This tells us organizations often rely on external experts while defining and developing their internal accessibility programs but then begin to transition to in-house experts.

## Program Structure and Accountability Model

Since most organizations have one or more internal accessibility champions and experts, we were curious to understand how they organize and coordinate their accessibility work.

We learned the most popular model is the hub and spoke model – adopted by 29% of organizations. In this model, each team is responsible for doing its own accessibility work, but a central team provides organization-wide strategy, investment guidance, and implementation support. Other models for program structure were used in less than 20% of organizations.

- 19% - Multiple, Coordinated Efforts: Accessibility work is performed within each department, and these departments collaborate to meet organizational goals.
- 17% - Multiple, Siloed Efforts: Accessibility is addressed by multiple departments with little or no interaction with other departments.
- 16% - Centralized Effort: Accessibility is addressed within one department only (e.g. the external facing web team conducts accessibility development and testing, and no other departments proactively address accessibility).
- 18% - No Program: Individuals advocate for accessibility and perform accessibility-related work.

The survey asked how accountability for accessibility work is enforced. 43% of organizations rely on a single person or team to provide accessibility advice and guidance and another 32% rely on a fully distributed model where each team is responsible for their own accessibility.

We found no significant correlation between accessibility maturity and the program's structure or accountability model. These decisions regarding how to structure the accessibility program and how to hold teams accountable are frequently determined by the organization's culture and operational model.

## Employee Hiring and Development

As observed earlier, organizations with more mature accessibility programs appear to reduce their reliance on external accessibility expertise by developing in-house experts. When evaluating a job candidate's accessibility expertise, many organizations (53%) look for demonstrated work experience, 38% review a portfolio of past accessibility work, and 17% prefer candidates with an accessibility certification. Other considerations include:

- 15% - Preference for candidates with a disability
- 12% - References from members of the disability community
- 9% - Degree in accessibility
- 7% - Publications
- 9% - Other
- 34% - none of the above

We also wanted to know whether these organizations provide a formalized training program for their own employees and whether it is mandatory or optional.

The survey results indicated:

- 36% - No formalized approach
- 33% - Optional training available internally for all employees
- 19% - Mandatory training required for some employees
- 12% - Mandatory training required for all employees

## Resources and Services

As discussed throughout the paper, there are some common investments and approaches to building and running accessibility programs. To better understand where accessibility professionals are turning for assistance and guidance, we asked respondents to share their main resources for accessibility knowledge. The vast majority (69%) of respondents go directly to the original standards and guidelines such as those from the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). WebAIM tools also scored highly – being cited as a key resource for 24% of organizations.

As part of its mission to support the growth of successful accessibility professionals and accessibility programs, the IAAP was also curious to understand what resources are missing and would provide the most value. The top five responses were:

- 71% - Strategies for consistently authoring accessible content and media
- 64% - Design and engineering practices to create inclusive products/services
- 61% - Proven model(s) to build and run an org-wide accessibility program
- 57% - Periodic analysis of global trends driving and shaping accessibility
- 55% - Methodology to evaluate and report my org's accessibility maturity

## Conclusions

Of the 205 survey responses, 68% indicate their organization is motivated by the need to comply with laws and regulations, 59% cite the need to include all audiences, and 33% consider accessibility an inherent part of their organization's purpose. However, only 24% of these organizations have an established compliance process, and only 18% use internal accessibility scorecards to track and evaluate their progress. These processes and scorecards are known to improve accessibility outcomes, so there appears to be a disconnect between aspiration and implementation of the necessary accessibility controls.

The survey results show there is a correlation between increased program maturity and organizational investment in key leadership and management components. Therefore, we conclude that organizations seeking to build effective, scalable accessibility programs should invest in the following top 10 areas:

1. Dedicated Funding and Resources for Accessibility
2. Written Organization-wide Accessibility Policy / Commitment
3. Tools with Built-in Accessibility Checking
4. Accessibility Design and Authoring Practices
5. Accessibility Engineering and Testing Practices
6. Recurring Engagement with the Disability Community
7. Accessibility Criteria in Contracts and POs
8. Central Accessibility Team and a senior leadership role
9. Accessibility Compliance Process
10. Internal Accessibility Scorecard

The vast majority of respondents indicated a desire for better guidance regarding authoring accessible content and media, effective design and engineering practices, and proven models to create and run an effective accessibility program. All three areas represent opportunities for accessibility tool providers, training organizations, and consultants to deliver greater value to these organizational customers.

Although there is no one size fits all approach to accessibility, there is value in learning from the experience of others who have traveled a similar path. This report assembles the collective wisdom of more than 200 fellow accessibility practitioners. It shows there are well-known investments and operational models that can help any program grow and evolve to produce more consistent accessibility results.

We hope this paper provides new insights that can help accelerate the growth of your own accessibility efforts. For additional resources or questions, please contact the IAAP at:

[info@accessibilityassociation.com](mailto:info@accessibilityassociation.com)



## About IAAP, A Division of G3ict

The mission of the International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP) is to define, promote, and improve the accessibility profession globally through networking, education, and certification in order to enable the creation of accessible products, content, and services.

### IAAP Strategic Goals

#### Association Development

Develop and fully execute a complete governance model to ensure the success of the association both financially and in meeting the overall goals for its membership.

#### Individual Professional Development

Develop and implement activities, including a certification program, to enable professionals working in accessibility and those interested in knowing more about accessibility to influence and implement accessibility within any organization.

#### Organizational Development

Develop resources and programs by which organizations, corporations and government entities can learn and grow their accessibility strategies to increase overall access and opportunities for persons with disabilities.

#### Community Development

Develop a program to make connections amongst the broader accessibility community and beyond to reach the goal of supporting existing efforts and grow the numbers within the profession.

To learn more about the organization please follow us on social media or visit us at:

[www.accessibilityassociation.org](http://www.accessibilityassociation.org)

## Acknowledgements

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