From Reactive to Proactive: Building a Sustainable Accessibility Program - Lina Trifon

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(AI-generated – may not be accurate)

PART 1 — CHALLENGES IN STARTING AN ACCESSIBILITY PROGRAM

Lina outlines recurring barriers almost every accessibility lead encounters:

• **Technical debt**: Teams start with an audit, discover an overwhelming number of issues, and have no sense of where to start.
• **Competing priorities**: Leadership frames other initiatives as “strategic,” pushing accessibility out unless mandated.
• **Limited resources**: Usually no dedicated accessibility team; often a solitary practitioner.

• **Knowledge gaps**: Many staff don't know what accessibility is or why it matters.
• **Lack of buy-in and resistance**: Seen at both leadership and individual contributor levels. Without culture change, every improvement becomes a negotiation.

Lina notes that these challenges are universal across organizations and must be acknowledged before solving them.

PART 2 — THE W3C ACCESSIBILITY MATURITY MODEL

To avoid wandering without direction, Lina introduces the W3C model as a roadmap. It evaluates organizations across seven dimensions of accessibility, but she focuses on two:

1. **ICT / software development life cycle (SDLC)**
2. **Knowledge and skill building**

The four maturity levels:

1. **Inactive** – No awareness or program.
2. **Launch** – Early awareness, minimal structure. Lina usually enters at this stage.
3. **Integrate** – Accessibility embedded into standard workflows.
4. **Optimize** – Accessibility becomes culture; deeply ingrained.

She explains how assessments help teams understand their true starting point, identify realistic next steps, and avoid wasted effort.

PART 3 — HOW SHE TYPICALLY ENTERS AND SETS EARLY GOALS

Lina usually joins organizations in the **Launch** phase: leadership recognizes a problem but has not developed structure or resourcing. Her first goal is always to move the company into **Integrate**, where accessibility becomes a routine part of design, development, QA, and planning.

PART 4 — THE DUAL-TRACK STRATEGY

She introduces the approach she uses to build sustainable programs:

TRACK 1: REACTIVE (Addressing past problems)

Focus: fix what already exists; reduce harm.

1. **Audits**
   • External audits are preferred—industry credibility, especially in regulated fields like education, healthcare, and finance.
   • Manual testing is essential; automated tools miss much of the real risk.
2. **Prioritization**
   • **Frequency of use** — fix widely used pages first.
   • **Severity of impact** — blockers for AT users take priority over inconveniences.
   • **Product roadmap alignment** — don't fix features scheduled for deprecation or rebuild; instead embed accessibility into the replacement.

   She stresses that showing teams hundreds of raw audit issues is counterproductive; grouping and prioritizing prevents overwhelm.

3. **Remediation Process**
   • Address issues in **batches**—by component or user flow—rather than issue-by-issue.
   • Component libraries are powerful multipliers: fixing a button or form component once can improve dozens of screens.
   • But component libraries are not magic—implementations often need updates too.
   • Documentation is essential. In companies without design systems, she creates a **design decision log** so everyone knows the standardized accessibility choices.

This track reduces "drowning in debt," but Lina warns it's insufficient alone; without prevention, the debt will simply recur.

TRACK 2: PROACTIVE (Preventing new problems)

Focus: shift left and embed accessibility into everyday work so fewer new issues are created.

1. **Training**
   • General training builds awareness; role-specific training (design, engineering, QA) makes expectations clear.
   • Learning must be ongoing—one-off training sessions fade without practice.
2. **Guidelines and Checklists**
   • Best practices and role-based checklists reduce friction and decision fatigue.
   • People need concrete, small steps rather than vague mandates like “make it accessible.”
3. **Process Integration**
   • Require accessibility checkpoints in design reviews, code reviews, and QA.
   • Use accessibility annotations in design artifacts to clearly communicate requirements.
   • Build accessibility into standard operating procedures so it becomes routine rather than optional.

After applying both tracks, organizations can reach the **Integrate** stage, though further growth requires addressing procurement, HR, and other domains.

PART 5 — HER EXPERIENCE MOVING COMPANIES TO “INTEGRATE”

In one previous company, Lina helped make ~95% of the product accessible and embedded new processes so effectively that accessibility became normal practice. The downside: once the reactive work was completed, leadership dispersed the dedicated accessibility team, assuming the work was “done.” In her current company, she is still on the journey toward integration.

PART 6 — CONCLUSION

Lina's recommended path:

• Assess your maturity level
• Empower teams with training and tools
• Tackle legacy debt through structured prioritization
• Shift left with proactive integration
• Iterate continuously; every organization requires tailored adjustments
• Use early wins to build credibility and expand influence

She provides resources: the W3C model, and materials and self-assessment rubrics produced by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Q&A SUMMARY

Question: How do you get stakeholder buy-in before you're even at the Launch stage?

Lina says this complex issue could be its own talk. She suggests starting small within your role—fixing color contrast, raising awareness consistently, and showing simple, tangible improvements.
Ben Ogilvie adds: the most effective low-cost method is **user testing with real people with disabilities**. Recording even a short clip of a user struggling with the product builds empathy and motivates leadership more than slide decks or compliance arguments.

Thomas Logan notes that "shame is a powerful motivator."

Question: What types of products are you referring to? Does the maturity model apply to both web and mobile?

Lina has worked on web products, mobile apps, and a kiosk system. She confirms the maturity model applies broadly to any organization, not just specific product types.

Question: Does the “it’s illegal to have an inaccessible website” argument help?

A participant explains they tell clients this to motivate action.
Lina agrees: **legal risk is a valid lever**, especially in industries like healthcare or education. It’s part of the buy-in conversation, though not the only tool.

Question: How do you get departments to focus on manual testing and proactive work instead of relying on automated tools?

Lina emphasizes educating teams that automation detects only a fraction of issues and that real users use assistive technologies. Start small—keyboard checks or basic screen reader pass-throughs—before growing expectations. Gradual introduction helps adoption.

Question: How do you make accessibility valued long-term—not just as legal risk but as part of quality?

A participant notes legal risk isn’t a sustainable motivator.
Lina agrees, adding: accessibility should be built into **KPIs**, performance reviews, and job descriptions. It should be treated like security: non-negotiable. She’s still advocating for this in her current organization.

Question: Can an organization ever stop needing reactive work?

Lina says yes, to a point: one of her former companies reduced legacy debt to near zero, and teams incorporated accessibility well enough that a dedicated reactive team was no longer needed.
But: once the reactive team was dissolved, there was no long-term accessibility team—creating a bittersweet outcome.

Question: What happens when an accessibility lead leaves—who takes ownership?

A participant worried that if they and their manager leave, no one else will push accessibility.
Lina says the ideal state is a culture where accessibility is already embedded and not dependent on one advocate. Realistically, the best mitigation is building **clear ongoing processes**, so the next designer or PM inherits “how we work,” not a set of personal initiatives.
