



**Change agents:
How can C-Suite and
IT leaders build a culture
of digital accessibility?**



Contents

Survey methodology	03
Executive Summary	04
Drivers, motivation, and measurement	05
Customer experience: people before profits	06
A never-ending task?	08
The skills gap: accessibility training	10
Overcoming barriers	11
Change agents: accelerating accessibility	12
Build a network	13
Clarity of leadership	14
Have a clear vision	16
Embrace business benefits	17
Hold yourself to account	18
About AbilityNet	19



Survey methodology

On AbilityNet's behalf, The Dennis Insights team reached out to 78 UK based C-suite executives in July 2021. This took the form of an online survey, which, on average, took less than 10 minutes to complete.

Some 76% of respondents were DA decision-makers.

Respondents by role (C-suite)	
Chief Executive Officer	42%
Chief Technology Officer	15%
Chief Operating Officer	10%
Chief Financial Officer	6%
Chief Information Officer	4%
Chief Human Resources Officer	3%
Other C-suite	29%

Sectors surveyed included IT, retail, arts, culture, media and sport, and manufacturing. The majority of those who took part came from smaller businesses with <250 employees.

Respondents by sector	
IT/Computing/Data Processing	19%
Retail/Wholesale/Service Industries	13%
Art/Culture/Media/Sport	8%
Manufacturing	8%
Construction/Engineering	6%
Hospitality/Tourism/Leisure	6%
Education	5%
Financial	5%
Sales/Purchasing	4%
Transport/Distribution/Storage	3%
Personnel/Human Resources/Industrial Relations	3%
Utilities	1%
Other	15%



Executive Summary

As a disabled person who has worked in digital accessibility all my career, it feels strange that we're still asking "Why invest in it?" However, our survey of C-suite leaders' attitudes to digital accessibility (DA) shows a lack of awareness of the competitive advantages.

Sure, 73% reference DA in their diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies. But it is legislative rather than competitive advantage that remains the key driver for change, and 22% perceive accessibility as "a never-ending task."

Leaders say they don't know how to measure the impact of accessibility, but they aren't benchmarking their websites against international standards. After measurement, training is the second biggest challenge - yet fewer than half of the leaders surveyed have a training budget for accessibility skills.

And, although there may be collective responsibility for accessibility, just 45% either strongly agree or agree that there's a named leader for accessibility.

AbilityNet's detailed report offers valuable insights, exploring the challenges - both real and perceived - facing business leaders looking to start their digital accessibility journey, as well as highlighting some key change agents that will make that journey far smoother and quicker than they may have thought.

Embracing digital accessibility is a key component of the broader Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) agenda too, and will boost your brand, and help you to reach more customers

Read on to discover what the C-suite sees as the barriers and, more importantly, the levers they can pull to accelerate change.



Robin Christopherson (MBE)
Head of Digital Inclusion, AbilityNet



Drivers, motivation, and measurement

C-suite executives do realise that accessibility matters, with more than three-quarters (77%) in our survey citing it as ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ important.

Compliance is currently seen as the main driving force behind the need for DA with 71%^[i] and 73% of respondents (C-suite and DA decision makers, respectively) saying that the need to comply with

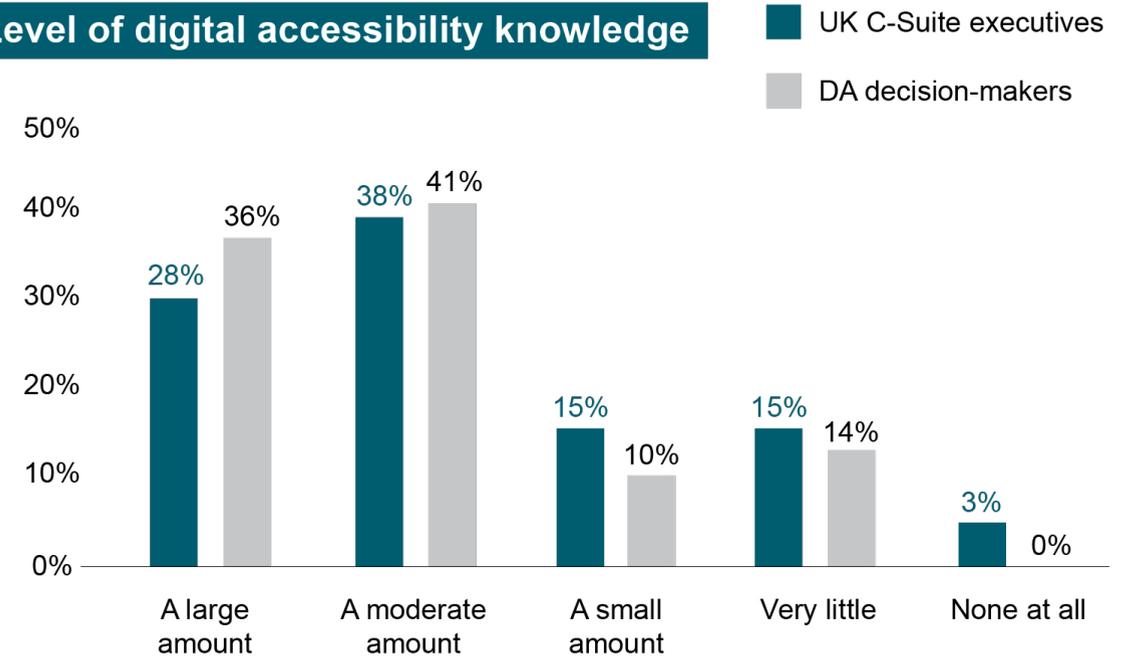
legislation is either an ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ important factor.

In contrast, only a small number of respondents are actually keeping track of and measuring their digital accessibility progress. Just under one-third (29%) are benchmarking performance against internationally recognised accessibility standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)^[ii].

1 in 4

leaders are
reliant on very
limited knowledge
about DA

Level of digital accessibility knowledge



[i] 71% rate as extremely important in response to the statement “There is a need to comply with accessibility regulations.”

[ii] The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are globally recognised guidelines that help to ensure websites are inclusive and easy to use. The Web Accessibility Initiative publishes them, a sub-group of the World Wide Web Consortium, which aims to improve the accessibility of the World Wide Web for disabled people. The current version of these guidelines is 2.1, but W3C has already announced plans for WCAG 2.2 and WCAG 3.0.

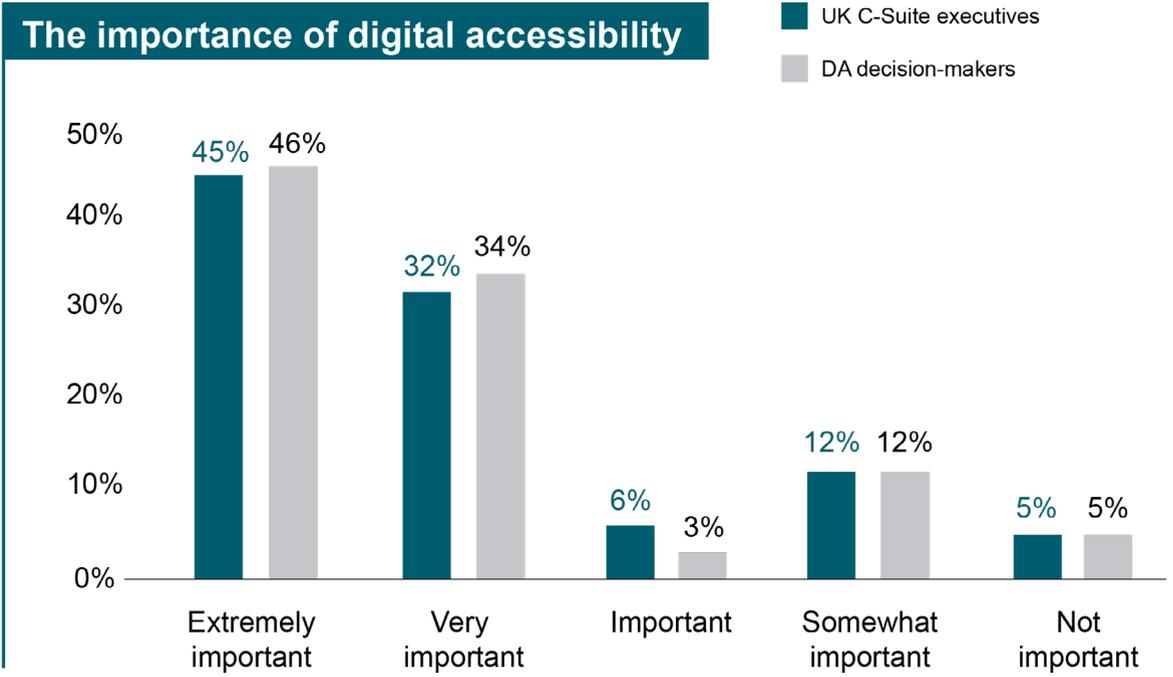
Customer experience: people before profits

Are brands really giving people what they want? Our research suggests there is a reduced focus on customers, with only 50% of C-suite executives and 53% of DA decision makers rating the statement “Customers are more likely to buy from us as an ethical brand” as either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ important.

That seems out of kilter with previous surveys that show a big shift towards ethical consumerism. For example, a literature research guide produced by Mencap^[1] shows the majority (92%) of consumers feel more favourable towards

companies that hire disabled people, while just over half (56%) of consumers are willing to pay more for products or services from a company known for its commitment to social value.

More recently, a 2021 report by Deloitte found that 28% of consumers have stopped buying certain products due to ethical or environmental concerns. In our research, some 60% of C-suite respondents and 63% of DA decision makers surveyed rated “Hearing from customers who are unable to access our services” as ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ important.



[1] As cited in Mencap review of literature <https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-06/2017.061%20Benefits%20of%20employing%20PWLD%255b1%255d%20%281%29.pdf>

Motivation for embracing digital accessibility (% Extremely/Very Important)

■ UK C-Suite executives ■ DA decision-makers

There is a need to comply with accessibility regulations	71%	73%
Digital accessibility is good for our brand reputation and enriches our brand narrative	69%	71%
Digital accessibility is the right thing to do	68%	73%
Being accessible helps us to reach more customers and can boost profits	67%	73%
Digital accessibility's impact on the bottom line	62%	69%
Hearing from customers who are unable to access our services	60%	63%
Inclusive design drives innovation and helps us to create products that are more accessible for all of our customers	59%	66%
Customers are more likely to buy from us as an ethical brand	50%	53%

A never-ending task?

The path to digital accessibility is largely seen as a burden rather than a benefit, with many ignoring the myriad positives on offer to a wide range of stakeholders.

Of the C-suite leaders we surveyed, 22% see DA as a “never-ending task,”^[1] and one that 18% believe is a “cost with no return on investment (ROI).”

Given such strong feelings, it probably shouldn't come as a surprise that some 15% say it's hard to secure a budget for digital accessibility.

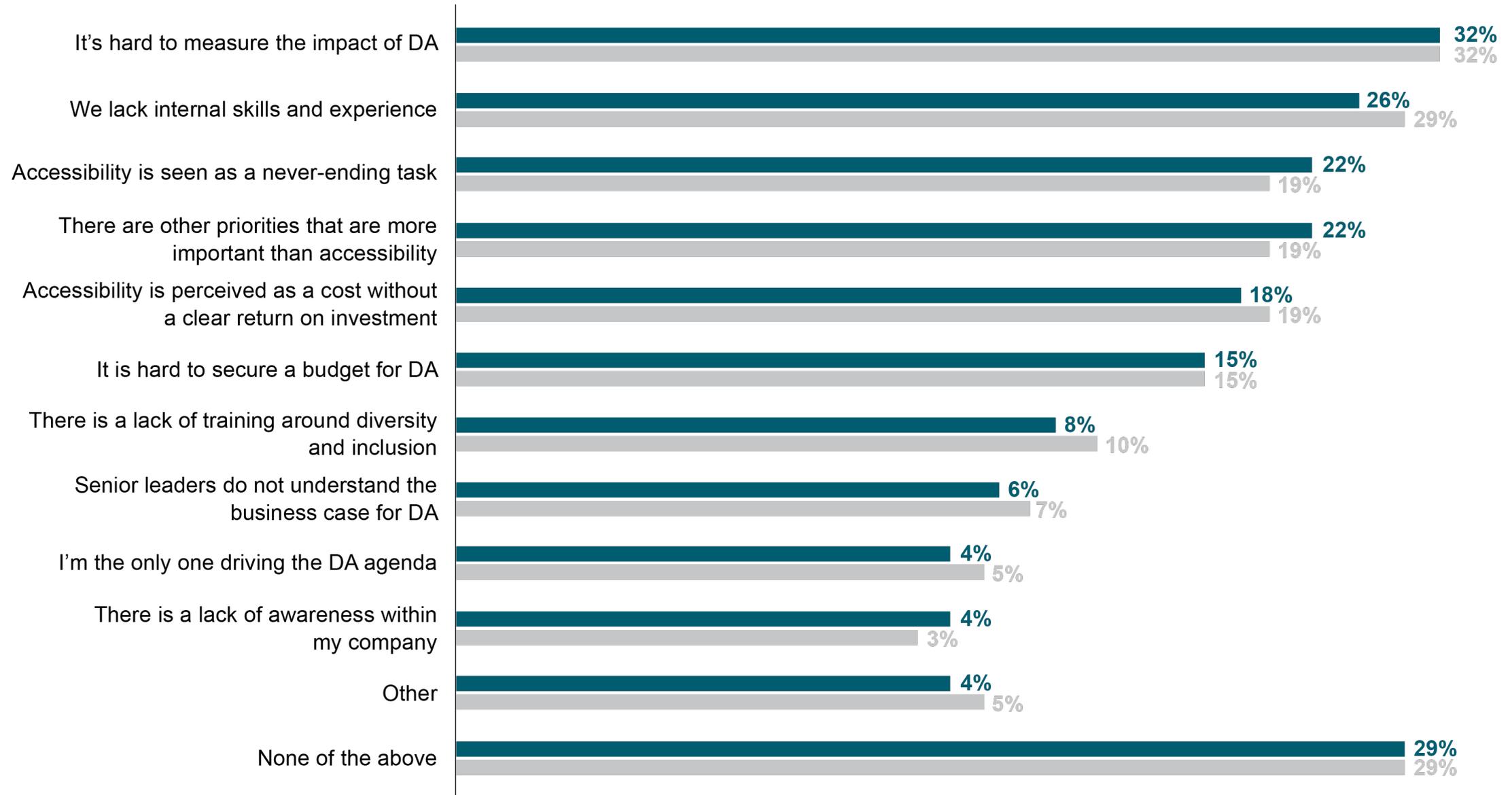
Accessibility doesn't have to be so difficult. Hear from other leaders who have embraced a culture of inclusion here: **AbilityNet A11y Culture**.



[1] 22% of those surveyed see DA as a never-ending task.

Barriers faced in delivering digital accessibility

UK C-Suite executives DA decision-makers



The skills gap: accessibility training

Aside from return on investment (or lack thereof), another perceived barrier is a lack of relevant expertise and skills.

Of those surveyed, 26% of C-suite respondents believe they “lack the internal skills and experience” to drive DA. The figure is even higher for DA decision makers, with 29% saying their firm just doesn’t possess the knowledge required here.

Where companies are supportive and have embraced training, the most popular topics for C-suite leaders are “DA training” (35%), closely followed by “disability awareness training” (32%) and ad-hoc accessibility training (31%).



Overcoming barriers

It's clear from our research that digital accessibility can feel like a daunting task. For us, it's a learning journey towards shifting attitudes - and it's time worth investing.

We recommend you focus on just a few critical areas for change. In doing so, you can accelerate your digital accessibility journey, embed key measurement tools, and actually empower your staff to be

part of an exciting transformational journey.

Our survey explores a series of "change agents" - key areas that, if focused on, will accelerate your accessibility journey. These five change agents are: **building a network**, **clarity of leadership**, **clarity of vision**, **embracing the business benefits** of digital accessibility, and **holding yourself to account**.



Technology is so amazing in levelling the playing field and enabling people to reach their full potential

Staff engagement with digital accessibility

	UK C-Suite executives	DA decision-makers
Digital accessibility is everyone's responsibility	44%	44%
Accessibility knowledge and responsibilities are clearly defined within all teams	31%	37%
Accessibility knowledge and responsibilities are clearly defined within relevant teams [e.g. digital and IT teams]	24%	27%
We have an accessibility champions' network designed to embed accessibility throughout the company	23%	29%
None of the above	35%	34%



Change agents: accelerating accessibility

Accessibility is important, but it doesn't necessarily get the recognition or resources it deserves. Strong leadership is vital but when we asked who the agenda belongs to the answer was somewhere between "everyone" and "no-one."

When it comes to staff engagement, fewer than half (44%) of those we surveyed told us that "digital

accessibility is everyone's responsibility."

Meanwhile, there's a clear lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities.

Only 31% of C-suite respondents agreed that "Accessibility knowledge and responsibilities are clearly defined within all teams," and even within digital and IT departments, responsibilities are unclear.^[1]



Digital accessibility responsibilities

Yes - I'm a decision maker **76%**

Yes - I'm involved in the process **17%**

No - I'm not involved with accessibility **8%**

[1] Just 24% of survey respondents agreed that "Accessibility knowledge and responsibilities are clearly defined within relevant teams."

Build a network

Networks made up of champions are a well established way of winning accessibility allies.

Such networks provide a great way to disseminate messages, particularly if you only have a small team with limited resources in bigger organisations.

Among those we surveyed, only 23% agreed that “We have an accessibility champions’ network designed to embed accessibility throughout the company.”

The results may reflect the fact that many of the C-suite executives we surveyed work at smaller organisations. Despite that, the reality is that intrinsic changes to culture will only happen if everyone within an organisation – regardless of its size or sector – truly buys into the tangible benefits of digital accessibility.

Download our FREE guide for tips to help you build an accessibility champions’ network: **AbilityNet 14champs**.

Staff engagement with digital accessibility agenda (*Themes*)

Fully engaged

“Whilst we have a designated leader, digital accessibility is seen as the responsibility of all staff. There is a six monthly individual staff review to ensure all staff needs are being met.”

Management led

“The IT Director is looking into this at present to define company policy.”

Covid impact

“Currently due to the effects of covid this has taken a place on the back burner”

Clarity of leadership

Leaders largely feel confident in talking about DA (74% of C-suite respondents feel completely or fairly confident), and it's great to see 73% referencing DA in their D&I strategies.

However, the lack of ownership and accountability still presents a large barrier to future DA success.

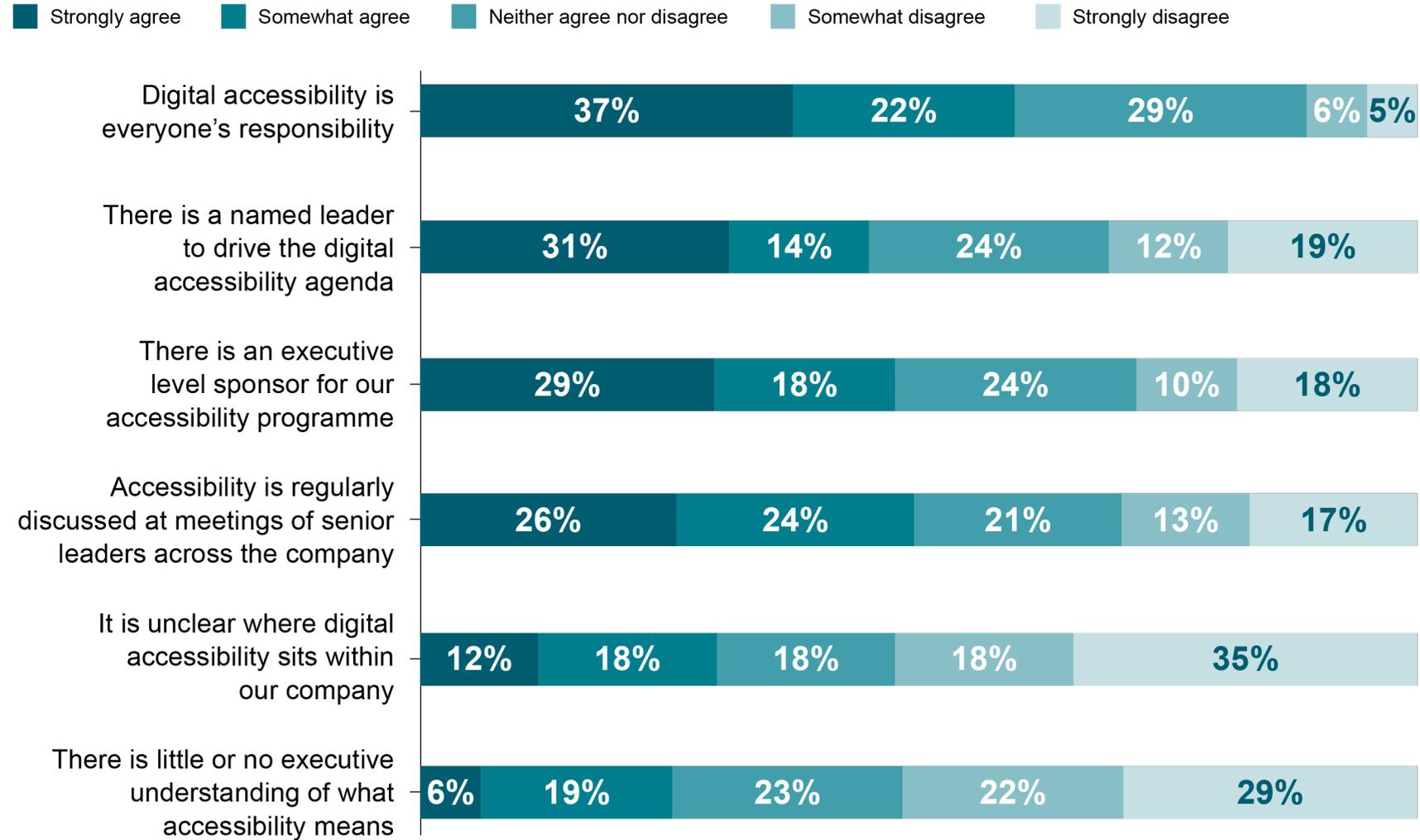
Some 45% strongly or somewhat agree there's a named leader for DA. However, half have an

executive-level sponsor for DA to fully demonstrate senior leadership's commitment.

Clarity of vision from the top is vital in driving the accessibility agenda forward. It's why Caroline Casey founded The Valuable 500, a global movement to get disability on the agenda at the board level. There's also further evidence to support the theory that diverse and robust leadership accelerates change when it comes to DA.



Attitudes towards digital accessibility leadership



Have a clear vision

We've already heard that many leaders think accessibility is a "never-ending task". And it really can feel that way without clear leadership and an even clearer vision.

Just 22% of respondents told us they have a clear roadmap outlining their vision for DA. But, if you don't know your destination, how do you know when you've arrived?

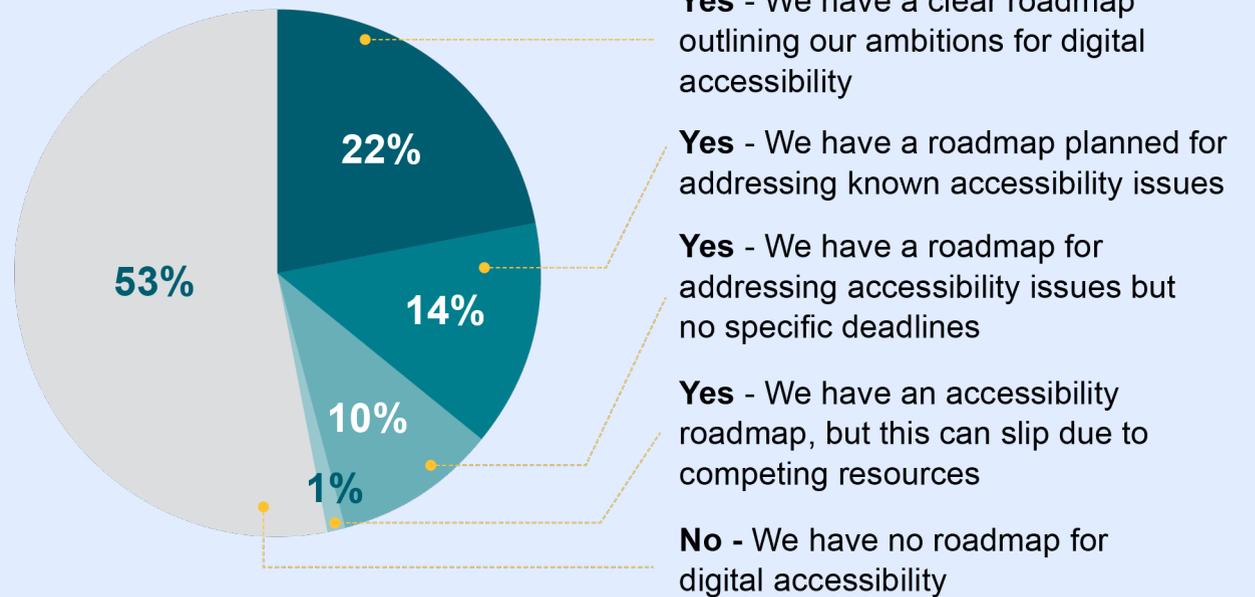
A further 14% said they have a roadmap for known

accessibility issues, and 10% said they had a roadmap for known issues but "no specific deadlines."

To reiterate: clarity of vision is vital in driving a culture of accessibility as well as motivating staff across your organisation. That's why it's a key pillar of AbilityNet's DA Maturity Model (DAMM), designed to help organisations measure their progress in delivering DA.

AbilityNet Accessibility Services DAMM

Digital accessibility roadmap



Embrace business benefits

Leaders can often fail to recognise the overall advantages of investing in DA. For example, just 59% of C-suite respondents rated inclusive design as ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ important.

Yet, several studies point to a tangible return on investment. Indeed, an Accenture survey found that so-called “inclusion champions” were twice as likely as others to have higher total shareholder returns than those of their peer group.^[i]

What’s more, the relative cost of retrofitting a product or service can reach up to 10,000 times the cost of introducing inclusive design earlier on.^[ii]



Business is about delivering to the bottom line. The only way we can get growth and innovation is to access different lived experiences. That insight leads to innovation and, for growth, access to more markets

[i] (Accenture, 2018) https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-89/Accenture-Disability-Inclusion-Research-Report.pdf

[ii] (PwC Australia, 2019) <https://centreforinclusivedesign.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/inclusive-design-report-digital-160519.pdf>

Hold yourself to account

Knowing how to measure accessibility was the highest-rated challenge among surveyed C-suite leaders, with almost one-third (32%) citing this as a barrier in delivering digital accessibility.

Despite the focus on compliance, as we've already highlighted, few leaders (29%) are actually benchmarking their digital accessibility progress against internationally recognised web accessibility (WCAG) standards. And just 31% share these benchmarks at board level, reflecting the lack of accountability of a named owner regarding accessibility.

Our research also found that a mere 27% have an up-to-date DA statement on their company website. This means customers cannot be confident in their level of compliance when it comes to their digital real-estate.

You don't have to be fully compliant, but having a statement outlining the areas you're working on is a clear signal to customers that you're taking accessibility seriously and are on the right path. What's more, a website audit can provide a benchmark and means you have something against which to aim for and measure progress in the future.





About AbilityNet

Access to digital services is a human right – regardless of ability or age. We believe in “a digital world accessible to all” and that no one should be locked out of the digital world.

AbilityNet has a long, over 20-year history working in digital accessibility. We’re at the heart of a community for inclusive digital design, and experienced consultants empower the private and public sectors to deliver accessible websites, services, and apps.

In addition, we’re architects of TechShare Pro, the UK’s largest accessibility meetup. Each year we deliver a comprehensive suite of and paid-for training to upskill people.

Our charitable purpose

AbilityNet is a charity, and in 2020 we delivered £1.3 million worth of public benefit.

We empower disabled people through technology at home, at work and in education. Our volunteers support individuals directly and by working with charities and community groups.

Plus, we help employers integrate digital accessibility into their D&I agendas.

Get in touch

To find out how we can support you to make your digital services accessible: Call our Digital Accessibility Services team on **+44 (0)1926 465 247**
Send an email to **sales@abilitynet.org.uk**